

THE MAHARANA BHUPAL

COLLEGE LIBRARY

UDAIPUR

## THE COMBAT

*NOVELS BY ROMAIN ROLLAND*

CLERAMBAULT

COLAS BREUGNOT, BURGUNDIAN

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE

Dawn  
Morning  
Youth  
Revolt

JEAN CHRISTOPHE IN PARIS

In the Market Place  
Antoinette  
The House

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE

Journey's End  
Love and Friendship  
The Burning Bush  
The New Dawn

PIERRE AND LUCE

THE SOUL ENCHANTED

I Annette and Sylvie  
II Summer  
III Mother and Son  
IV The Death of a World  
V The Combat

# THE COMBAT

*Being Volume Five of  
The Soul Enchanted*

By  
ROMAIN ROLLAND

*Translated from the French by*  
AMALIA DE ALBERTI



LONDON  
THORNTON BUTTERWORTH



*First Published*     -     -     -     -     1935

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN, BY THE STAR AND GAZETTE COMPANY LTD  
FOR THORNTON BUTTERWORTH LIMITED  
15 BEDFORD STREET, LONDON, W C 2

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
PART ONE	9
PART TWO	151

This is a work of fiction, and all characters in the book are drawn from the author's imagination. If any names or titles belonging to living persons have been used, this has been done inadvertently and no reference to such person or persons is intended.

t

## PART ONE

# THE COMBAT

## I

THE first days of their love were intoxicating. The honey-moon blazed like a sun. There was a hidden fire of alcohol in that honey. From what plant had the two bees pumped it? It was not only from the flowers of spring. They had both prematurely tasted the juices of summer, some of them bitter and devastating enough. Young love, mixing them in his alembic, had made of them a marvellous philtre. All was new, all was pure, all was flame. Is there anything which flame does not cleanse and renew? (But what will remain, afterwards?)

They spent the days and nights like mad birds, mouth to mouth, clinging, drinking in each other's breath, clutching with all their talons, like two ships grappled together, which have reached the very heart of the stronghold. They shut themselves in for days and nights, the window of the room slightly open, refusing to go out, refusing to open their door, devouring each other, never satiated, exhausted.

Annette, who succeeded in forcing an entry, found them on their bed—they made no attempt at concealment—drunken, haggard, happy, worn out, burning with fever and voluptuousness. And Assia, clasping her boy's head, defied Annette with wild and hungry eyes. But Annette, looking at them with tenderness, pressed both heads in her hands, and said, jerking her chin, smiling and anxious.

"My poor children. Don't eat up all your corn! Keep some for a bad season!"

She knew very well that they would not listen to her. She withdrew on tiptoe. She was sad and happy. She knew the future too well. But it was a good thing that they should

have the present ! So much saved ! She took care that they should not be disturbed Without telling them (Assia knew it later, Marc with a man's carelessness never did), she looked after their home, during those bewildered weeks when it seemed quite natural to them that the housework should do itself, without their having to trouble themselves about it She was their daily help, arranging everything, silent and invisible When Assia began to emerge from the state of intoxication in which she had been drowned, made an effort to free her heavy head, and lent an ear to the rustling of the busy shadow that came and went about her home, her pride was roused, perhaps sooner than her gratitude lovers think it natural that people should serve them on bended knee She recovered the use of her legs to go and reclaim her household government Annette, who was sweeping the dining-room, saw her come in, barefooted, in her nightdress, wide-eyed, like a little owl just come suddenly out of its barn into the sunshine Annette laughed, dropped her broom, ran to her and took her in her arms Assia, quite serious—she had not yet emerged sufficiently to laugh—let herself be kissed like a condescending princess, and seated herself on Annette's knees, while she held her chin and gravely studied her face Pressing her thumb against Annette's cheek she made her turn her face to examine her profile Then she took her cheeks between her hands and looked deeply into her eyes At this contact the steely pupils relaxed, the hard-clenched fingers loosened, and the still moist hand caressed Annette's mouth And Assia said

"Thank you "

"I don't want thanks," said Annette

"I don't care what you want I want to thank you Thank you ! "

"What for ? "

"For having made him "

Annette squeezed her to her

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"Is he well made?"

"Exactly to my measure!"

Their laughing eyes met They would have brooked no challenge The two gossips were not afraid to praise God's good things But Annette said, with gay humility

"We mothers never more than half make them It is for you to perfect him!"

"I have begun to work at it already"

"Oh! it is not the work of a night It is a difficult job You will have to wear your fingers out at it Have you any patience?"

"Not a ha'porth!"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"It will be enough if he has"

"I can't answer for that"

"Then I'll return him I have been cheated over the bargain"

"If I were to take you at your word? If I did take him back?"

"No? Just try!"

She drew back with an air of defiance

"Peace, peace, my beauty!" said Annette "There is no danger You've got him, and you'll stick to him It is in the order of nature You have taken my son from me Someone will take yours from you"

"Oh! it's a long day to that!" said Assia "I reap my harvest and eat it Time enough later to bother about the seed"

"Take care the summer does not come too soon!"

"I am not afraid of it I love fire"

"I have been through it," said Annette

"I can smell it," said Assia, sniffing at her "There's a smell of scorching in the corners still"

"The fire is out"

"Do you swear to it? I am going to stir up the ashes!"

## THE COMBAT

"No, no, no, no ! I don't want to begin over again  
Everyone in his turn Your turn with the fire ! Be sparing  
of it "

"There is always plenty ! "

Annette had her doubts But it is not prudent to express them The young know everything best May the God of fire watch over them ! One can do nothing Fire cannot hear It has neither ears nor eyes It has but a tongue, not for speaking, but for darting , it leaves nothing unconsumed It is famished It must be fed continuously with fresh fuel Marc and Assia had more than Annette suspected Their hearts went on burning for months after the great bonfire of the beginning They had taken up their life of daily work again, their eyelids lowered over the flame of desire, but as soon as they raised them, it flared up , their greedy eyes devoured each other like those of the couple in the Farnesina It seemed as though they would never be satiated

And then, from one day to another, the fire went out  
And it was dark

## II

The catastrophe did not strike both at once One after the other The blow fell first on Assia

She was getting ready to go out Marc had just left her They had browsed upon each other The blinds of the room were down Outside, sunshine and the noise of the street Assia sat upon the bed, empty of thought Weary, rather sad, sickened The room was stuffy She pulled up the blinds The sun came in She looked at herself in the glass, her arms raised to arrange her hair , the strong light hurt her eyes, she blinked The brief second that her eyelids were lowered and raised a plunge When she opened her eyes again she was



---

## THE COMBAT

---

not in the same country, the two instants succeeding each other were not in sequence there was a monstrous hiatus between them The woman with blind eyes seeking her way could not find her shadow nor her sunlight she could not find love any more She turned giddy She sank down on a stool against the wall She had not even had strength to lower her hands which were clasped above her head They weighed upon it, like a capital She stared before her, stunned She could see nothing She thought of nothing She thought nothingness Nothing in her heart Nothing in her mind A complete void Not a trace of the past When she tried to fix it, to cling to it (she was falling from a tower) her blood congealed everything had become strange to her, that man, that body which had touched her, the memory of her transports, that woman naked and surrendered, that Assia "To love To love " She repeated the two dead words, without understanding them Not a thrill, not a feeling corresponded to them She said to herself

"I am mad I know quite well that I loved him ! "

But her hallucinated consciousness replied

"What ? What is it ? I do not understand "

She spent hours in bewilderment, crouched in her corner, never moving It was nearly evening A church clock reminded her that "the other" would be coming home She started up She washed, did her hair, and composed her face In the glass she saw "Nothingness" again in the depths of her sad, hard eyes She drew a veil over it She could not show it naked Pity for the other, or fear of herself ?

He noticed nothing—lovers are full of themselves—and that blind-eyed selfishness made the arid abyss deeper The rancour she felt at it tore the veil she had drawn over her eyes, he plunged into them, and stupefied, found a desert But the veil was drawn once more He did not try to draw it aside again To his questions, she answered

"Nothing "

---

## THE COMBAT

---

He took care not to insist    He was frightened

At night, he held a lifeless body in his arms, yet the body was alive, and lent itself passively to his wishes—a body emptied of its being—the one he knew, his treasure, was gone. Thank God, he did not see another being hidden in the shadow, watching him with an icy glance. But though he could not see, he felt the coldness of it. In the midst of the embrace, he released the passive body. Though she lay still she seemed to him like a falling stone, slipped from his hands. Face to face, in the bed, they held their breath and pretended to sleep. But each was spying on the other, with heart and limbs contracted.

“Who is this being facing me?”

Assia, persuading herself that Marc was asleep, took the opportunity to escape, she turned over, very slowly opposing him with the wall of her back. Marc followed all her movements, like those of a stealthy animal creeping away, and he asked himself, in anguish

“What have I done to her?”

Assia felt his breath on her back, but before her, the empty bed and the free night. She fled, as if into the forest. Happily, the feigned sleep changed into real slumber. It came down upon them both and stopped the pursuit short. When daylight came they found each other, aching but disentangled, they smiled, without daring to look at each other too much. Marc had learned to fear Assia, Assia, to be afraid of herself (That was worse! she was not sure of what might come next.)

Then Marc's turn came. The gulf opened. The next day, in the hour following hours of love, in which his thoughts were wholly engrossed with desire and joy in the beloved, there came upon him a total absence of love. The beloved was nothing but a dead weight. His indifference was so overwhelming that it came almost within a line of disgust, and scarcely within two of hatred. The interior revolution seemed all the more terrible that it came about noiselessly, without shock, one

---

## THE COMBAT

---

became aware of it after it had taken place. Marc looked on, horror-stricken. In his passionate loyalty he accused and condemned himself. But he could not help it. He was brought face to face with the accomplished disaster. It took all his remaining strength to hide the ruins from the other. It was not enough. Assia, warned by her own experience, scented the ruins.

They went through this in turn. Never both at once. Sometimes it lasted for hours, sometimes for days. It seemed as if repetition tended to prolong the phenomenon; it no longer had the violence of the first blow, but that only made it sadder and more overwhelming. It took the zest out of life. They never had the energy to tell each other of these attacks. They hid them from each other like some shameful disease. And in this silence the disease was becoming chronic; it was installing itself. Annette, the only one who could have instructed them, they kept at arm's length, and she was careful not to interfere in their household; she knew her daughter-in-law's touchy character, she could only win her confidence by not seeking it. Besides, she was taken in by them. After foreseeing and expecting the inevitable lowering of temperature that follows high pressure, now that the depression had set in she did not perceive it because her children were agreed in hiding it from her. To the eyes of others, they never appeared to be such a united couple as on those days when their love was trembling on its basis. For they were ashamed to confess what seemed to them an infirmity, an evil without cause!

Yet neither of them was a novice in love; they had both tasted it to satiety. But none of their previous experiences had had the intensity of this one. Until now, there had been no question of real love, but rather young desire that goes a-hunting, rejoicing in the game, nothing unwholesome, but nothing deep, the heedlessness of Nature experimenting, and gaily making mistakes—there is plenty of time!—Or if, by chance, she has got caught in the game, she loses her temper

and throws the game over, as Marc did, in vexation, when Sylvie tried to push him into the trap—But there was no trap here, nor any game. It was a question of the *whole* of life, freely offered and accepted. They had told each other everything and shown everything. They had given all and taken all. They had poured the whole torrent of their life into their love. And that was precisely the reason (but they could not understand it) why having poured everything out, they had nothing left—not a drop! When love was at the ebb, the torrent of life had run dry. They were perishing, stranded.

It was not till much later that they reached the wisdom which understands and pities, which mutually excuses, and reserves for each one a refuge, in which to await the end of the reflux, and the coming of the next tide. For it is nothing more nor less—the rhythm of life has its oscillations, all the wider when life is prodigally expended. Every retreat is succeeded by an advance—unless the violence of repeated shocks should strain the bow-string, and the spring of the heart be warped.

The bow was good, but the archer had lost confidence. Even when the fountain of life flowed again, they could not forget the periods of drought, and how they had then regarded each other.

They were no blindfold lovers, afraid to look at each other. At every moment of their love they had seen each other, as they were, unveiled, naked, with their weaknesses, blemishes, and vices (every body has some, even the best and most beautiful). Both had sharp eyes and gloried in seeing and showing all. When the dead periods of the heart came on, they could discover nothing in the companion that they were not familiar with. But it was the way of seeing that counted! When they loved each other, they loved even these defects, perhaps they loved them (secretly) better than the good qualities, the beloved appeared nearer, more helpless, more touching. But when love was in eclipse, what a change in shadow and relief! The same lines grew deformed—the grotesque and the odious.

---

## THE COMBAT

---

became apparent what misery ! How had they love—to endure ? To endure what they would see and have beside them for a whole lifetime !—If the eclipse was over, did they reassure themselves ? In broad daylight the places they knew and loved, they could never forget what they had seen, and Assia's disquieting glance persisted in scrutinizing the face and movements of her lover, who felt that he was being watched, and watched her in his turn. Afterwards, they would fall into each other's arms, loving each other all the more because of it, with a kind of concentrated fury—fury against self, fear of losing each other, pardon ! pardon !

But the wave receded and advanced, ebbed and flowed again. They knew that they could never stop it. They had lost their security.

Of course ! Nothing can be built on love. They knew it, or ought to have known it. Life is a work-yard where work is never at a standstill, there is no room for idlers ! The right to love, so be it ! But like the right to bread, it must be paid for by work. He who does not work has no right to eat no more of love than of bread. The iron law. If parasite vermin still succeed in escaping it, they find their own punishment therein. The stolen bread sticks in their throats. They die of nausea upon their pleasure. No ! one does not live by bread and love alone. Work and create !

### III

Even had they wished it, Marc and Assia had not the means to live in idleness, lip to lip, bemoaning the ups and downs of love's thermometer. Both had to earn their living. Marc was employed by a firm for the sale and installation of radios. Assia did Russian translations for a publishing house. She also translated and typed commercial correspondence for an export

firm They only met at meals and often fairly late in the evening But work does not extinguish "*the other thought*" It accumulates in an airless cell, where it ferments "*The other thought*", the inextinguishable aspiration of the caravan, journeying across the dreary burning sand, towards the fountain, in the starry night

"Oh, night! Oh, spring! Must I find you tepid, tasteless and troubled! My thirst increases, unassuaged"

Every night they took each other, with a thrill of anticipation and a more devouring need They loosed each other, unsatisfied—they dared not own it—disappointed But while Marc persisted in the pursuit, and the more she escaped him, was the more determined to possess the beloved still more—that there might be left no corner of her territory of mind where he might not enter—she resisted, becoming conscious again, with proud bitterness, of love's limits in herself

"I open my door to you, of my own will Come in! But only so far You shall go no further"

She re-discovered, beyond the doors of her heart, illimitable spaces, where none had right of entry she had not explored them herself, they were lost in the distance —*the soul*"

"My body, and my heart are yours But '*the soul*' no! *The soul* is mine Is it mine? Or does it own me?"

And the soul was precisely what he wanted!

And she did not believe in that "*soul*"! Like a good post-1917 Russian, fed on the materialistic broth, according to the official formula, she had cut off her soul with her hair She no longer made use of that empty word She said "Me, my needs, my rights" And who reminded her of that old-fashioned word, that obsolete song?

It was Annette—She had, at last, discovered the widening breach between her two children, which they were hiding from her But they were too passionate to be skilful Their looks showed what they were hiding Knitted brows, nerves on

---

## THE COMBAT

---

edge, they faced each other, like two young animals at defiance  
they refuse and want each other

"You are mine ! "

"I am my own                "

But if she who refused had been taken at her word, she  
would have thrown herself upon the other, crying

"Take me ! "

Ah ! how well Annette knew those combats ! She remembered the tears of Roger in the woods, and the distant barking of the dog in pursuit of game <sup>1</sup> She understood and pitied her boy, and secretly she whispered

"Courage ! "

One day when Assia, alone with her, a storm brewing within, persisted in an angry silence (she was convinced that Annette would not understand her, or if she did, would think her in the wrong), Annette, who did not seem to be looking at her, and was smiling at a baby's cap which she was making in secret, pursed her lips and hummed, under her breath

*"El corazon te daré  
Tambien te dare la vida  
Y el alma no te la doy  
Porque esa prenda no es mia"*

Assia pricked up her ears She had the facility of the Slav  
She seized the meaning of some of the words

"What is that ? "

"Did you understand it ? "

"What is that ? "

"Our battle song "

Assia laid her hands on Annette's

"Our song ? *Mine !* "

"Well, repeat it in French ! "

Assia translated haltingly, corrected by Annette

<sup>1</sup> *Annette and Sylvie*

## THE COMBAT

" I give you my heart—I give you my life—But I will not give you my soul—for that treasure is not mine "

She stopped, startled, and asked

" Who said that ? "

" *Una niña bonita*, like you and me                      Would you like some more ? "

She continued

" *Una niña bonita*  
*Se asomo a su balcón*                      "

(" A pretty maid—leaned over her balcony—She asked for my soul—I gave her my heart—She demanded my soul—so I bade her good-bye ")

Assia, speechless, swallowed hard, and dug her nails into Annette's hand    Annette bent over her and kissed her hair

" Do not bid him good-bye ! " she murmured

Assia, irritated, drew back

" How do you know ?    What do you know ? "

" I suckled him    I know how greedy my boy is ! "

" I should hope so ! " said Assia    " If he was not hungry for me, I would have none of him "

" But if he is hungry for more than your milk "

" I give my life                      " said Assia, repeating the Spanish song

" But I do not give my soul                      " continued Annette

" Am I wrong ? "

" No, you are right "

Assia fell upon Annette and seized her arms

" I am right ?    You say so ? "

" I do "

Assia embraced her impetuously

" Take care !    You'll prick yourself," said Annette, putting her needle and work aside    Then she said gently

" But just because you are right, you must be indulgent to my boy    He does not know    None of them know, poor boys !



## THE COMBAT

It is for us, who do know, to understand them, and love them as they are "

" I do love him just as he is ! If he were different I would not love him "

" Then why do you torment both him and yourself ? "

" Because he torments me "

" He is a child He is your child The man who loves us is our child We must fondle him and give him suck, and if he bites us, the puppy, it is to cut his teeth on us He is a good dog "

Assia passed her hands over Annette's arms

" What are you looking for ? "

" The teeth marks "

Annette withdrew her arms

" How indiscreet ! "

" Tell me ! "

" Tell you ? What about ? "

" One of your affairs with your dogs "

Annette repeated the end of the *copla*

" *Y el alma no te la doy*  
*Porque esa prenda no es mia* "

" Then one cannot share it with anyone ? The soul must be kept for oneself alone ? "

" No, not for yourself ! "

" For whom, then ? "

" For itself "

" I don't understand," said Assia

" Neither do I," said Annette, " but it is true "

Assia slipped to the floor, and mused, her cheek resting against Annette's knee Then she said

" Yes, it's true But it isn't reassuring This stranger who dwells in me and commands me, this thought that invades and escapes me who is it we harbour ? "

"You must not be frightened of it Everybody harbours the same All the tenants are not comely One cannot help it It takes all kinds to make a world The whole question is that of being a world, that is of knowing how to organize it You don't know yet You'll learn "

"I shall learn what ? Not to let thought pass into action ? But there is only a line between them And for oneself, when one is honest, a thought is as good as an act A woman who thinks of a lover, in her husband's bed, knows very well that she is as false to him, as in the lover's bed "

Annette's ironical good sense called a halt in time

"That's understood, my child He is a cuckold A thought is enough But at least, let it prevent the action There is only a line between as you say But to the husband, to other people, if not to ourselves—the line is very important Spare my Marc, I beg of you, don't cross the line ! "

Assia, who was very capable of appreciating irony, laughed heartily

"No question of that ! I love my Marc both within and beyond the line "

"Perhaps you will not always love him within the line "

"Why not ? "

"You have said it Our thought escapes us over and over again Don't follow it ! It will come back And while you wait for it, my big daughter, it is useless to let your companion know that your thought has crossed the bridge "

"Lie to him, I ? No, never ! "

"It is not lying to spare him useless torment Fight your battles alone ! You can tell him the result afterwards "

"Then, I should keep my serpents to myself ? "

"Devour them ! Every woman must eat them, alone Or, if you have too many, I am here Invite me to your meal ! "

"One never knows if you are speaking seriously "

"Seriously, yes Tragically, no Nature is what it is There's no use in protesting One must know, and do one's

best to steer it If one can't and the boat is swept away, there's nothing left but—to pray—or to laugh—according to taste "

" Laugh ? "

" Why not ? It's our last victory "

" Daughter of the Vikings ! "

" Very possibly ! When I was young, Sylvie used to tell me that I was a Normandy heifer I remember browsing in fair meadows on leaving the ship that brought the fair-haired warriors of the North "

" Browse, pray, none of that for me ! I am ready to laugh, but at the enemy's expense, while fighting Not accepting ! "

" Accept or not ! What does he care for the permission ? "

" Who ? "

" He who is coming "

In her effort to rise, so as to look into Annette's face, Assia's fingers touched the work which Annette had dropped, she turned it about mechanically, then in surprise

" Why, what are you making ? A cap ? "

She examined it

" Who for ? "

" For him who is coming," said Annette

" Who told you ? Marc swore he would not tell "

Annette stroked her cheek, with her hand that hung down

" Nobody told me But I thought that he was on the way So I am getting ready The little greyhound must have long legs You two grown-ups, you have run enough ! "

Assia laughed, and rubbed her face against the hand that caressed her

" He runs ! I feel his little legs in my womb He runs, and he will run Ah ! My God ! What about me, am I to be chained up ? I won't be, I am not made for the kennel "

" What are you afraid of ? " said Annette " Since you do not hold your soul yourself, who is there to put it on the chain ? "

## IV

But Annette herself could only guide her children half the way. After that she knew no more than they did. She had lost her bearings. Though they did not tell each other, she participated in the same crisis of thought—just because their natures were akin, and each of them was going his own way, by different tracks of the same road, they all came to the same deadlock.

The unformulated religion of Annette's whole life was her high individualism. She had fed upon that flame which, purer in her than in most, was still the aliment she had in common with the foremost of her generation—especially the strongest and freest—with all those whom she had chosen or accepted as lovers, friends, or allies. To them, as to her, the irremediable blemish and sin seemed any, even partial alienation of the free ego. Anything rather than renounce it! Material poverty and solitude. That was little enough still. She was even inclined to fall into the opposite excess. More than once, she had found herself attracted (she did not like to admit it) to the asocial, the *condottiere*. Hence her sudden impulses, her conjunctions, inexplicable in the eyes of the worthy folk who knew her, with a Philippe Villard and a Timon. These good folk would have been greatly surprised—she, too, perhaps—if her conscience, her real conscience, that which took no account of morality, had said —“I am more akin to them than to you.” Better be a wolf than a sheep! Better anything, than a sheep! The obscure incoercible horror for the flock!

She had instilled it into Marc with her blood. And, perhaps, it was not the best legacy she had given him. In any case, it did not make life easier for him. Marc had never been able to attach himself to any school of thought. Even as his mother would never consent to shut herself up in any marriage bed, he

refused to imprison his mind between the sheets of any doctrine. He could not understand the masochism of the majority who persisted in padlocking themselves with backs bent and deformed in cages à la La Balue ! What had he to do with all their quarrels between the "*isms*"—materialism, spiritualism, socialism, communism etc ! They are all collars of dogs on the chain

And Assia likewise fled from the chain, fled from constricting walls, fled from the channel, the course marked out, fled and fled from everything that could bind, so much so that in trying too hard to safeguard her ego, she ended by losing it, like a stream that overflows, and goes astray in the fields. By sheer flowing it loses its course and current. Beware, lest it end as a shoreless Maremma stagnating in the sun ! And ware to Marc ! This little queen of fever, this stream without a bed, what business had it in his bed ?

She had tried, and he had tried, to realize between them isolation for two, a double-headed individualism, like Janus. It is the instinct of life. The ego, the ego ! It is always hungry. It must be fed. "Feed it on you. I want to be you. Be you ? Have you ?" The two heads of Janus are not set back to back, but mouth to mouth, the two suckers. Which will devour the other ? The orange is either hard and bitter, it resists, or it is soft, and is sucked dry, and then what is left to quench my thirst ? The skin ? I throw it away. It is not long before I find my solitude and thirst once more "

And it was not long before Marc and Assia had this double taste of bitterness and dryness on their tongues, the boredom, arising in healthy and sincere beings, from the consciousness (franker in Assia, more repressed in Marc) of the social uselessness of their lives.

Annette saw her son growing gloomy when he came to see her—not very often—for he felt awkward with her, and feared her too close scrutiny, although he tried to persuade himself that she could not see through him, he still had the masculine

tendency disdainfully to attribute to women a congenital incapability of getting away from themselves, a dim short-sightedness like somnambulists going about enveloped in the warm smoke of their dreams. When he came and sat in silence, or talked of nothing in particular, Annette saw the precocious lines developing on his worried forehead. And she listened absently. The thoughts of both did not listen to their words, but followed their own train. Once, Annette sighed involuntarily. Marc asked

"What's the matter, mother?"

"I am rather tired. It's nothing."

"When will you be able to rest a little?"

"When my children are happy."

"They are," said Marc.

Annette smiled, and looked into his eyes. Marc's first movement was to turn his away. Then he was annoyed at his weakness, and his eye sustained his mother's glance. He seemed to challenge her. Annette laid both her hands on his arm and she felt his muscles stiffen. She laughed and said

"Do you want to wrestle?"

Glad of this pretext to distract her thoughts, he disengaged his arms and grasped his mother's, squeezing them affectionately, as in the game of *petit loup*. She cried out. It hurt her. It did her good. She surrendered and said

"Strong, my boy! A good grip!"

He loosed her

"Oh! did I hurt you?"

"It's nothing. What a good grip like a vice I've given him. He is well armed. But to be well armed and strong is no use! One must know the adversary. Do you know him?"

She was no longer speaking of herself. He did not understand. Their foreheads were almost touching. She knocked hers against his gently, and repeated

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"Do you know him, my strong wrestler ? Do you know the adversary well ? "

"Who ? " he asked "You ? "

"Me, or her She who loves you best, and whom you love Are you quite ready ? "

He was puzzled He confessed

"I don't understand."

He was beginning to feel uneasy

She drew herself up, took his forehead between her hands so that he could not escape, and holding him before her eyes, she changed tone No joking now ! Never raising her voice, but inflexible ("I am not sparing you any longer ")

"Be ready ! She whom you love, she who loves you most, the time will come when she will hate you, and you will hate her Hatred is but little ! Nausea Your mere presence will be repulsive to her She will hide it from you, and from herself And it will last, it may last, for minutes, or for days It will follow the most ardent impulses of love, and they may succeed it Or else it may install itself in the house, noiselessly, under the placidity of daily life, for a longer or shorter period, and without altering the tacit understanding renewed from day to day But the evil will be there in the beloved heart And your own heart will not escape it In your own moments, or days, you will feel the same impulses, the same torments The worst of it is that your hours will not be her hours the rising of the soul in revolt hardly ever marks the same hour on both dials Perhaps it will be the evening when you approach her with the most fervent love that her heart will spew you out And it will be the night when her body clings most madly to yours, that your furious soul will whisper to her 'Go away ' But you will not say it And she will not say it For you will both be ashamed of yourselves and full of pity for the other Shame and pity That's good It is the first step Thanks to that step your pain will not be altogether wasted Most people, if they are

## THE COMBAT

but possessed of a little humanity, reach that stage, and stay there—But you, my Marc, you must go a step further You must learn to look the adversary in the face, as you are looking at me now—don't move—and say 'You are like that I love you as you are I love you, you who reject me, you who hate me against your will Forgive me It is the wild law of revolt It is as sacred as that of love And perhaps I should love you less if you were incapable of hearing it ',"

She stopped speaking, but she continued to press his forehead, and she felt his temple beating under her thumb He had held his breath Then they drew away from each other And they avoided each other's eyes

Marc in a smothered voice said under his breath

"I am afraid I am not ready "

Annette replied

"My poor boy Neither am I! I never was still after the battle But it is something to have provided oneself with a reserve force I give you mine "

Marc said in the same tone

"I am almost as frightened of it as of the adversary "

Annette laughed

"My dear boy! I beg your pardon "

Marc got up to go As he was going out, he turned back

"Mother! And you can love life? Why it's a monster! "

"There are some beautiful monsters," said Annette

Marc said, jokingly

"You're one of them "

"I am of that race I am not ashamed of it Try not to be ashamed of mine "

"If I were only sure that I would never make you ashamed of me! "

"What of, indeed! Since you sprung from me, everything that comes from you goes to my account I do not dispute



---

## THE COMBAT

---

my signature I endorse everything, both the present and the future "

" Even to the filth ? "

" Must have manure ! " said Annette jovially

" I have a cynical mother," said Marc, playing the young saint " And she quotes Labiche into the bargain ! "

" I would rather quote Rabelais But I spare your feelings my little Miss ! "

" I say, I say ! " exclaimed Marc, with vexation " Do you suppose I am afraid of words, or things ? "

" Well ! You turn squeamish before life ! "

" I am disgusted at myself I have a perfect right to be ! "

" No ! you have not Dig up your field ! Everything should serve to manure it Dung, and even worms and locusts Dig your spade in, like the naked man on Lemerre's old books ! Dig your field ! And don't forget Assia's either ! "

" Upon that score, honest lady," said Marc, " I am in no need of lessons "

Mother and son laughed in each other's faces

Marc thought, as he went downstairs

" If only Assia were like that ! "

### V

Assia was not so different from Annette ! Less so than Marc All women—white, black, yellow, or green—have points in common If they do not seem to see them, it is because, half the time, they are rivals, they steal men from each other (even though they do not love them it is an instinct which the best of them resist, but which the best of them are aware of) From the first, Assia had realized better than Marc, the hold that Annette had upon him And, naturally, her first task was to take him from her However much they felt themselves allies, and even loved each other sincerely, the instinct of each said

"This man is mine "

The only difference was that Annette lightly thrust this instinct aside, when she was conscious of it, whereas Assia's consciousness only came into play to add to it an increase of imperious selfishness which would brook no sharing And that is why in the love-crisis which she and Marc were going through, Annette's clear-sightedness was not of much help Besides, when she so bluntly revealed to her son the dangers of the feminine heart, to what extent, unconsciously to herself, did a grain of treason enter into it ? Assia would have thought so The woman who betrays to man the secrets of woman in love, is a traitress to her country And every woman is, when her turn comes But none of them ever forgives the other

The estrangement of the young couple had begun yet Assia would not have ceded an inch of the ground conquered from Annette On the contrary, she seemed more set on keeping possession of the enclosure, the more the wind of doubt blew within her

"Why did I come and cage myself up between these walls ? "

The child growing in her womb, was also part of the conquest The innocent ! (Was she less so ? Both were blind ) He was the flag of the conqueror And the man who planted him never guesses that he is the flag-stick he is caught

Yes, but Assia discovered too late that she was caught too She had run her head into the same halter And who held them ? The little body issued from her body, which riveted Marc in chains to her, it chained her likewise, it riveted them both to the outside world, the anonymous, the unseen master whom they dreaded and refused to accept—to the social body, with its overwhelming mass of servitudes They were bound, bound by their offshoot to that inextricable polyp of roots and radicles, to the fatalities of that blind progress, and of the sap, to its errors and the punishments that await it They could

---

## THE COMBAT

---

no longer observe it from without, in disdainful detachment  
They had gone and thrown themselves into the net

Caught in her own trap, the "*mãa*" ! One does not own to it But her throat was tightened as by a rope around her neck And he was the strangler, he, the newborn babe with his tiny hands like rags ! Bending over him, Assia watched him with troubled, rancorous eyes She was taken unawares

Yet it was not the first time she had been a mother Yes, there was that terrible memory that she beat back, that little victim, that blood-stained fruit She had thrust him into oblivion, sunk him in the depths of the water She was obliged to ! If she had not she would have gone into convulsions But was she sure that he would not come to the surface again—that he had not returned ? And if he were the newcomer, he who was just waking up, there, in her bed ? These mad flashes sometimes suddenly transpire a woman's hallucinated brain It would be useless to reason about them She did not try All she could do was to try not to think of it, let it pass, pretend that she did not know To resist would be to face it Face it, her blood ran cold She turned over, her face buried in the pillow

" I have seen nothing I know nothing "

But a moment later she was again studying the infant with sidelong glances All Assia's life was made up of these repressions and explosions in the caverns of being, which were hidden by the clouds, with their rainbow scarves, of the perpetual movement of daily life, the only one it is permissible to look at

And so she was in an attitude of defence towards this stranger—the child Almost more of fear (hostility even at brief moments) than of love The maternal instinct was little developed in her, and the first catastrophe, in obscure self-defence, had strangled it she could not have lived with that dreadful gaping wound, the will to live had stitched it up

clumsily, and the secret beating of stifled maternity was otherwise interpreted, with the complicity of conscience its call, as with so many women, had been turned aside towards the lover. She had thought little about the child beforehand, when she thought of it, she thought of the man. She had his seed. He was in her. He was hers. It was herself she thought of. She was the couple, she was all. And now! She was nothing at all. He had come, he who was everything. That little worm! And from the struggle of childbirth, she arose in the second place, a simple soldier, gone back to the ranks. As to Marc, say no more about him! He was relegated to the baggage wagons.

And who was he, this new master? Whence had he come? From the darkness, from death, from those skirmishes in the Ukraine, where the other little body had vanished? And whither was he going? Where was he leading her? Towards what other conflicts? This master slave in his turn, this link in the chain that bound her to a totality of fatalities past, present, and to come, to that enslaving society whose yoke she thought she had broken!

She gazed at him with stupefaction, with terror, with repulsion, with hatred—and, suddenly, with torrents of love. They swept away all the floodgates. The extraordinary passion of these impulses filled Assia's sky like thunderstorms, and like thunderstorms passed away, leaving a confusion of seasons in the atmosphere. Assia had unexpected weeks of blind, exclusive, animal passion, for the child. Nothing else counted then. Marc was the spider's mate. If she devours him, it is because he is in the way. He has played his part! Marc had the good sense to efface himself. He made no claim to her sucking worm. Like many men, especially when young, he felt disgust for the fruit of the beloved womb. The child only begins to interest them a year after he has been washed clean. Of what? His impurities? You have a fine

right to mention them ! From the obscure gulf of the Formless ? They need to recognize in him the lineaments and limitations—man

And it was from the moment she perceived them that Assia's torrent of passion abated. Here was no longer the mysterious master questioned by her hallucinated expectation. He was a very ordinary little man, with nothing of him she had lost, and almost nothing of herself—he was like the French babies she saw every day, without interest, exposed in the pale sunlight of the Luxembourg by the working-woman ants, he was not of the fabric of her dreams. What treason ! And he was healthy, normal, and exacting, he did not suffer himself to be forgotten. It was by his voracity that he still held Assia firmly by the breast. It gave her an animal pleasure to feel the greedy mouth draining her bosom. Yes, he held her, he had good hold on her ! And secretly she bore him a grudge for it, she thought.

“When and how can I escape ?”

She oscillated between rancour and love. And her most overwhelming discovery was that now she could be neither entirely free nor entirely captive. If she could only have been entirely captive ! Assia's entire nature (entire and changing with the succession of moments, but quite entire at every moment) found nothing more unbearable than Yes and No at once. Nothingness ! Better the worst ! She tried sincerely to give herself entirely to the child. Impossible ! One has to delude oneself like those mothers who imagine that they have laid the Easter egg, and to whom their featherless duckling is the miracle of miracles. Assia weighed the gosling on her palm, and thought

“One mediocrity more in the world. Sacrifice my liberty to it ? No, that's asking too much !”

And what was that liberty worth ? What could she do with it ? How occupy it ? Assia was too honest to deceive herself about him, or herself. If she had been born

eager and imperious, she did not try to persuade herself that a superiority of nature assured privileged treatment to herself and her offspring No ! She was more inclined to convince herself without mercy, of her own mediocrity Mediocre in mind, mediocre in heart, or rather less than mediocre , mediocre in body call it ugly

“ But what do I care ? Does it prevent me from being hungry ? I'm hungry as he is , he, this leech he is hungry for my breast And I seek like a blind puppy for the teat to bite on the breasts of nature Where is it hidden ? I must have it, and I seek it with my nose and my four feet If I have taken this man with me, it is that he may help me to find it, to make the milk spurt from the breast—a fig for insipid milk—the blood that wells up from the heart of life ”

## VI

The man was a poor help He was a blind dog, like herself , he chewed vainly at the tip of a withered teat, worn-out, almost completely dried up, on the old body of Mother Europe

He floundered in the desert of individualism

How is it ? It was once a great, shady, fertile, well-watered valley Even yesterday, when everything was burning, amidst the ruins of war, it was an oasis to the free spirit , there it found still its cool spring and pure nights under the palm trees Now the spring is befouled and trampled, the circle of palm trees is broken , the sand whistles through the broken screen , the sky is white and the air burns the desert has devoured all

I let us speak plainly ! It is doing the cowards too much honour to paint up their capitulation with imagery For it is nothing less Individualism, the free spirit, since the other war, has had its army of Metz and its Sedan It has surrendered What is left of it ? A few shreds of flags, hidden

in pockets, which are exhibited at private gatherings, or in safe palavers Who is he who dares hold out against the State and its dogs opinion and the Press? They call themselves free in their overlooked garden, they cultivate it, and gargle their throats with noble verses, like that Horace, the crouching dog, who on the chain, yapped proudly for posterity He at least had the cynicism to boast that he had thrown away his shield But these would have it believed that they are independent while they are being fed Between these proud intellectuals and the master (the master changes but the servants do not change) a contract has been tacitly established like that which governs domestic animals All liberty in your employment and on my farm! But do not go outside it! Upon these terms I will fatten you They have so acquired the habit that they do not even try to get out When the master lets them loose, he does not worry, they have their collars on The few who take them off, secretly, because they still feel a grain of shame, parade their necks in vain—the hair is gone Marc blushed to see masters whom he had esteemed, elders upon whom he had relied, pitifully trying to hide under a boast of free choice the conformity of thought to which they had made their submission by calculation or fear Such an example demoralized the younger men and taught them early to prostitute their brains they sold themselves to the highest bidder, but after the fashion of high-class prostitutes, they managed to make it appear that it was for love of the master of the day, who was keeping them As soon as an idea—red or black, war or peace—became official or was on the verge of becoming so, they rushed to serve it—into its posts If it wavered, they wavered, sniffing which way the wind blew But if, by ill luck, it died suddenly they did not dally over its obsequies They were already acclaiming the living king

This is of all times But what is of ours, is that our people, our men, our good, the intellectuals and all their Blessed

## THE COMBAT

Sacraments of democratic ideologies, have taken to the rôle of courtesans. When it was a degenerate aristocracy that prostituted itself, we had but to let it alone—dig your own grave! My fields above it will grow thicker crops. But now it is my fields that are rotting and betraying it—it is my light-words, my source-words from which the great individualism drew sustenance. Independence of Spirit. Where has it gone, that independence? At the best it is playing constitutional opposition to a government which it spares because it intends to make sure of the succession and endorses in advance the losses and charges of the inheritance. They have become so expert at swimming in a compromise of thought that, sometimes, the reds cannot be distinguished from the blacks, nor the right hand from the left, everything is mixed, and parties in Parliament, and outside it, are more or less amphibious.

"I even prefer the *arrabbiati* of reaction," thought Marc, "they are as open as the knife-blade with which they will stick me in the ribs some day. But these post-War socialists, these Judas kisses which would betray the Revolution and try to hamstring it, because it hinders them in their reforming, without haste or damage! These tenants of the State, they take good care not to upset the house which they count upon letting some day to their own advantage. And what have I to do with these investments of heads of families, and leases of prejudices and interests! If only I could find, in the West, a score of free men, resolved, at all costs, to seek and serve truth, wherever they may find it! Though it should be against their country or against their caste. Or even against themselves! Truth is the country of the free man. But all those I see around me have no country. They are voluntary serfs. They cheat their master, who lets them do it because he holds them. And these young intellectuals and the sharks keep shop together in ideologies and business. Yesterday war, the nation, Latin civilization. To-day the peace of Europe, and,



of course, liberty, which is the commodity of exchange (stock quoted on the Bourse, it is going down, it can be bought for nothing at present) ! He who would be free must have money And he who would have money must sell his liberty Strife of conscience ? Not at all ! The conscience of to-day is too soft-hearted to risk its health like that it proves to itself mathematically that if it is free, it has the obvious right to sell itself, enough that it wants that for which it sells itself And it does want it You have only to tell it what it is It will supply you with arguments at once It is only a matter of making them sounding Be it gold, or places, or parts to play, power,

He said well who said 'To will is to have power'  
To want power They all want it Every man his share And for what purpose ? When they are in, to stay in That is not the time when they can be expected to disentangle themselves from the network of compromises in which they have wound themselves in order to rise They will remain caught in it for ever, like flies in the web And who, and where is the spider ? It is gorged, and keeps watch on its larder The fat flies go on buzzing They try to persuade themselves that they are free They are not They get stuck faster with every movement of their wings "

Annette saw this in the case of her bumble-bee, her Timon In vain did he buzz and spread fear around him He could not escape And he knew it ! Annette was witness of his furies All he could do was to wind himself closer in the web, and with it he rolled round his back thousands of enmeshed insects But these only made a thicker and more stifling shroud for his own limbs He was caught They are all caught, the great catchers, the business kings, steel, petrol, matches, armaments They are stuck in the sticky meshes of the same web, when one thread vibrates, they feel it in their entrails, they are interdependent, and all are hung up together on the butcher's stall of the Spider the blind beast that has cast its drag-net over the river of life Economic

fatalism rules the ecliptic of human society, and tows spirit behind it

But Marc protested. He would not consent to sign the capitulation. He was resolved to maintain Spirit free in himself. He called to witness his two allies, two heads hard and obstinate in independence, Annette and Assia. Annette said

"Hold out!"

But Assia, smiling ironically, said

"What good is your free spirit to you?"

His heart shrank. He protested violently. But the blow had gone straight home.

Sterility of the individual                      He tries to deceive himself, in vain

"I am a world. If I save myself, does it go for nothing?"

She answered

"A world entirely self-centred, a red star dying out, there is no warmth left in it."

He said

"Assia! Not even you left?"

She took pity, but it was impossible for her to disguise the truth.

"Yes, my boy. I warm my finger-tips at it."

Such pity was worse than if she had said outright

"My heart is cold."

He tried to show fight

"But haven't you got your own hearth, your fire within?"

"I need fuel for it."

"But your little fawn!                      (He hesitated to add 'And your Marc?')"

She laughed

"My little fawn, and my big deer."

He replied, humbly

"Are they not enough fuel for you?"

She stroked his face, and he kissed her hand in passing

"Of course, of course, they make a nice little chafing-pan for me"

"Is that all?"

"It's a good deal But (forgive me) I would like to exercise my feet on the ground Hot or cold, what does it matter? I want to get my feet warm—walking, running, and acting"

"Well, can't we act together?"

"Yes, but how? What can you do?"

He knew his powerlessness too well, but he tried to protest

"We can do anything We are free"

She smiled her extinguishing smile

"Free to walk round the enclosure Don't talk nonsense! You know quite well that liberty is parked in concentration camps No exit! They might just as well strangle it But they are kind masters! They need only let the race die out The last of the free—free for what? They will keep them on view in cages in the Jardin des Plantes You'll be there"

"And you, Assia?"

"Not I I don't know how yet But free or not, I'll get out"

"Free or not? You would renounce liberty to get out?"

"Liberty is outside Give it any name you like! I leave you the word I want the thing"

She was the franker of the two He had always jealously refused to enroll himself in any of the parties disputing the ground on the field of battle, or haggling with each other over settlements behind the barrier He wanted to keep his liberty Well, let him keep it! Nobody was trying to prevent him What good was it? It did not provide him with food He had to spend his days in a publisher's office, his knowledge of three or four languages had procured him a rather important post in the business correspondence department, but he had nothing to do with the literary side precisely because he was known to have a personality of his own they took good care not to trust him with the reading of manuscripts,

and if he had found time to write a book, his own firm would not have offered a chance of publication. From time to time he wrote articles under a pseudonym in one of the two or three papers which still keep up, at little cost, the ancient reputation of independence, liberty of the Press, and other twaddle. There are only a few duffers of readers left to believe in them. Those who can read know better. It is an unspeakable hotch-potch of compromise. The master of to-day and he of to-morrow are both courted (moreover, the two enemies are cronies, or fire at each other's backs), peace is vaunted on the first page, armaments on the second, and the leading tenors of the troupe sing holy democracy and the sacred rights of humanity, while the directors pocket bribes to hold their tongues, or to silence the ingenious editors, who have taken the idealistic stunt seriously, upon the crimes and dividends of colonization. One day or another, some unlucky indiscretion reveals these great hearts, these knights of Immortal Principles, involved in some sordid piece of trickery of a Company for business or adventure which the rival band have denounced. Much ado about nothing! They have only to retaliate with the threat of another scandal against the other band of robbers. Both shout themselves hoarse crying "Justice! Justice!" for a week or two, then all is silence, they have made a compact. "I thieve to the right, you thieve to the left, let's say no more about it. Closed mouths and full pockets!" They are not full, the pockets of the honest fools of editors, the few worthy souls of no character, who have undertaken to play the part of idealists quite naturally in the gang, in order to rope in subscribers. They tell no lies, but they are the hook of the marauder who fishes in troubled waters, and they endeavour to forget this humiliating office. What else can they do? They must live! And where else could they write? They persuade themselves that they are fulfilling a sacerdotal office. Their slave driver is clever enough to let them row "freely"—well chained to their

---

## THE COMBAT

---

bench ! He knows very well that they are not dangerous and that the asthmatic strokes of their oars will not make the boat deviate an inch from her course It is the boat that carries them along, them and their claptrap of idealisms, like Tritons carved on the poop, while at the prow, beneath the foam, the jaws of the shark operate What have these "idealists" got to complain of ? Full liberty to pour forth their virtuous homilies ! So long as they apply to everything in general, and to nothing and to nobody in particular, all is well, it is part of the parade Rare, very rare, are the ill-conditioned spirits, like Marc, who jib at the rôle of drummer He has not the good taste, or—if not for his own sake, let it be for the sake of others—the charity to keep over his eyes the complaisant bandage which allows his companions to be dupes If they are not, must they then be accomplices ? It is a cruel test to inflict on worthy men whose hay is in the stall If they renounce it, where will they eat ? They are past their first youth, and the other stalls are occupied

It is only the rich who can aspire, without coming under any yoke, to speak their mind freely upon subjects which closely affect the interests of the day And naturally, the rich have something better to do than to undermine the ground under their own feet by revealing how their wealth was acquired Then there are those intellectual phoenixes who, being well aware of the impossibility or dangers of liberty in action, play the braggart with it and affect to despise it, a fig for the spirit that is enslaved by the realities of social and political life ! The only freedom of spirit for these heroes is sterility "*Faith without action*"—unless it be in that empty-rear of Ideas in which the clockwork runs down in the manufacturer's shop, with the doors closed to the risks and jolts of life Certainly they are free of life, for they are dead Benda, the crouching "clerk", watches over the whitening bones in the valley of Jehoshaphat He watches that the Angel shall not wake them

Could Marc's appetite be satisfied with such funereal liberty ? He spat it out with horror There is no spirit, there is no life, but for those who act ! But where are they, the real living ? And how can they manage to stand erect under the standard beneath which all heads are bent to-day ? Break the standard ! Make a hole in the ceiling ! You cannot do it alone It is your skull that would be cracked You must unite with other rebels But to unite is to be bound It is to accept the discipline of parties and the doctrines with which the parties are larded Marc refused Assia, whose approval he sought, shrugged her shoulders, and said dryly

"Who wills the end wills the means "

He protested

"Assia ! *You* to talk of putting on bonds ! "

She smiled her bad smile

"I put them on to-day I cast them off to-morrow "

He did not laugh

"Ours too ? Those between you and me ? "

"And why not ?"—she braved him—"if you are free you must be free to bind and unbind yourself I am "

"Assia ! Don't joke about such things ! "

She saw his anxious expression She smiled (the good smile this time !) And she kissed him

"Little boy ! "

He clung to her neck, relieved but a little piqued

"I am your man "

"No Not quite "

"Well ! What do you want ? "

"I want a *man* You, if you can be one Be one ! Or look out ! "

She was joking But there was always a serious background to Assia's jokes Marc knew it He was disturbed He asked

"Tell me what I ought to do "

"Ah ! no," she said, "that's your business Your part as a man "

"But what if you dislike it afterwards?"

"Like or dislike, I'll tell you afterwards Not before!  
You are the man Act first!"

This refusal to speak, or discuss, the suspended threat, the eye that observed without indulgence, and judged all his actions—it did not help to action It cramped him If she did not know clearly what she wanted, he knew too well that she would want him to do something that he could not and would not do For some time he had been aware of her scenting in the newspapers, in books, in speeches, in the air of the times, the odour of acts of violence, whose smoke rises from the sides of the old world to right, to left, everywhere, near and far, in America, in Russia, in Italy, in the Balkans, in Central Europe These outbursts of frenzy are, for the most part, disorderly, they seem to lead only to destruction, but the blindest and most bloody are a revolt against life Anything rather than remain supine! *Ignavia est jacere*

And this revolt accumulating in Assia, made her observe with unavowable avidity (which she did not admit to herself) even the rising of the Fascisms which are finishing off the anaemic liberties of Europe by beating them to death with a cudgel But her herd instinct, the call of the blood, drew her by preference to the combats of the U S S R She was slipping down an irresistible declivity towards the blood-stained destinies where a new world is being worked out by violence By the intuition of threatened love, Marc caught a glimpse of the mysterious workings of the mind of silent Assia he saw her about to roll down the slope and he wanted to hold her back, but he did not dare to look at the slope himself, that U S S R gave him vertigo, and he avoided mentioning it to Assia He made a side attack from a different direction, upon events in Italy, he tried to extract from her a word of blame, an outburst against these organized crimes Assia's lips remained sealed Marc exclaimed

"Surely, Assia, you won't say that you sympathize with what they are doing?"

She replied in a hard voice, without deigning to look at him

"More, in any case, than with what *others* don't do "

Marc was cut to the heart There was nothing to answer He knew too well that he did nothing, could do nothing His health had never entirely recovered from the terrible illness before his marriage, and premature marriage, with the mad expenditure of his convalescent energies which it had led to, was not calculated to re-establish it To this he owed first reprieve and then exemption from his military service, and this saved him the trial of refusing, as he was determined to do, and from condemnation But, perhaps, it would have been more wholesome for him to brave it out, for the feeling of having resisted would have assured him against himself He would have liked to do so, even with no object, since now there was nothing to oblige him to assert himself, he would have liked to do so, to declare himself, out of pure defiance But his two counsellors had opposed it—Assia, because she could not understand the vanity of useless bravado (it might pass, if he had been forced to make a decision! Though in that case she thought, like the communists, that one's duty was to enter the ranks so as to take the enemy's arms, not to refuse them!) she thought conscientious objection silly Annette, who knew its greatness, avoided pushing Marc into it, because she felt that his conviction was doubtful, and that his refusal would be due more to pride than to sincere faith And too many "reasonable" reasons pleaded with him to accept the loophole the expected child, his heavy duties as a family man, and his health He escaped But it left his morale humiliated, regret for a battle not engaged in, for a defeat (Assia had put her finger on the sore spot) for "*what he had not done*" He felt lowered

He ought to have taken his revenge by some other action, either by word or in writing—but, as we have seen, his opportunities for doing so were very limited He could not act, even through his pen, he could publish nothing, but a few words



---

## THE COMBAT

---

at long intervals, which awoke no echoes He was walled up in his prison of individualism His only light came from above, from the empty sky Only his mother could put up with that (Could she put up with it? She did not tell others what she lacked, and that the sky was not enough for her ) But all the same she could breathe, she had made for herself a beyond there

Marc had none That beyond is as much the kingdom of death as the kingdom of the Infinite Marc needed windows looking on to the world of the living And to jump out of the window into it Then jump! Can't you see Assia's eye under its lid, watching your movements? If you climb on to the window-ledge, she will have sprung to the ground before you Yes, he saw it He saw that that was what she wanted of him, what she was waiting for

But he could not make up his mind Below, there was that tyranny of violence which he loathed He loathed it all the more that it was in his blood his feverish blood, which would be only too much inclined to tyrannize Since, thank God! he could not do so—he trembled, sometimes, at the thought of the abuses he would have been guilty of—he could not tolerate it from others He concentrated all his violence on not yielding an inch of what belonged to him his own being Ah! if Revolution were—as of yore, when it aborted in fire-works—a free outburst of revolt, when one throws everything into the common heap, every man his own! But to-day it is militarized It is a barracks Discipline extends to everything, actions, writings and thoughts Even to philosophy and science, which the new priests of the sickle and hammer have pretensions to govern Have they not fulminated anathema against the free hypotheses of physics and modern energetics which escape from the channel of the materialistic Marxist Gospel! And perhaps they are within their rights if they are determined that Anno I of the Revolution shall be Anno Hegira the holy war must have its Koran

But Marc kicked against imposed gods    He could not understand feeling in the field of spirit    My spirit is my own    Don't dare to touch it !

It was quite indifferent to Assia    Spirit like the body, is for him who can take it—for the strongest    And the strongest will only take it as much as I like    I will take it back when I want to

## VII

She was becoming detached from this Frenchman, who did not know how to take or completely to renounce—whose whole energy was dissipated in not making up his mind to anything. She looked around her, and began to draw comparisons which were not to his advantage.

Annette had introduced her into French circles where an attempt, still rather feeble, was being made to bring about a cultural *rapprochement* with the U S S R. There she had met certain Russians of the Soviet organizations. Annette had come into contact with some of them in the days when she was working for Timon. They had had time to study her. They took time to study her daughter-in-law. Assia received orders for Russian translations for an exhibition of international decorative arts, which was being organized in Paris: articles on Russian peasant art, weaving, toys, Palekh lacquers, the theatre, etc. Then pamphlets of skilful intellectual propaganda. Then more technical works for the Soviet Commercial Representation in Paris. At first she did the work at home. Then, after a fairly long interval of observation, corroborated by the testimony of a childhood's friend working for the Soviet Embassy, who saw her, not without reserve, at long intervals, the door was cautiously opened, and Assia was admitted to the antechamber. When her child was weaned (and Assia did not consult him in the matter) she shunted him on to Annette, who asked nothing better, and went to work at the Commercial

Representation Like the candidates to Christianity in the early days, who were allowed to follow the services in the porch, outside the sanctuary, Assia had her work-table in a side room off the hall And, little by little, she spent whole days there

She took a pleasure in it, the nature of which she did not try to explain to herself She did not admit that she found herself once more on the native soil of her mind She pretended, not without rancour, to think herself liberated from it But this pretence provided an escape from the other soil where she had taken root "You don't hold me Nor you, nor you!" She felt relieved by it In the evening, on leaving the Russian atmosphere, she went back to her French hearth with greater pleasure But, she had to leave it to be able to appreciate it thoroughly A good excuse to herself for flying from it!

It was not a good excuse to Marc (besides, Assia did not mention it to him, she would not have condescended to excuses) He was gloomy He immured himself in a stiff and angry silence It was the worst thing he could have done He looked like an angry master It is all very well to play the master if one is the stronger But if one is the weaker, how ridiculous! The supple spine of an Assia would have quivered, not without pleasure, under the claw, ready to take her revenge later! But those sulky lips, those knitted brows, that futile bad temper, which did not deign (dared not) express itself just enough to let her see that he had the will, but not the power to subject her, and to incite her to enfranchise herself Assia took a hostile pleasure in boasting to him about what she had learnt It was inevitable that in both their minds comparisons should arise between the sterile opposition of Marc, and the fruitful energy of the U S S R, of those who took action Marc, who drew these comparisons himself, and suffered from them, would not tolerate that Assia should make them to him The duel of their minds became embittered, they accentuated what divided them by expressing it In the end Marc asked Assia, in an imperative tone, to

cease going to the office    Assia firmly replied    "No!"    She was free

A strange way of asserting one's liberty, to rush to those who had established over the immense Union of Socialist Soviet Republics the iron hand of ideological, social, economic, and police Dictatorship, and would have liked to establish it over all the rest of the world! But by reaction against Western liberalism, unorganized, invertebrate, without boldness or vigour, which was game for the worst exploiters, the brutality of Moscow, employed in the service of the exploited classes, had the effect of a keen wind, that whips up and purifies the blood. It cleared the brain, heavy and oxydized by the rust of the French thought without will. No servitude is so repugnant as that which accepts and deceives itself, or sulks without virile revolt—that of the West. Assia felt freer under the hard thighs of a Dictatorship which bestrode the people to ride them to victory, than penned in the enclosures of a pseudo-democracy which allows its flock to graze—or die of hunger—without letting them go out, or act, while waiting for it to dispose of them, either for war, or for peace—or for shearing or the butcher's stall. If she had been told that she and hers would be given privileged treatment, such as these democracies give to those sold to the Press or to Parliament or to those selected for fattening, Assia would have spat their favours back in their faces. Favour is but another servitude, the basest, that which is paid for. That servitude, at least, her Marc would never accept, and there was no danger that it would be offered him. That is why he was still dear to her. But why did he resign himself to refusing servitude without overthrowing the enslaving order? True, he could not do so without binding himself to a discipline of combat, which was a new contract of servitude, but consented to, temporary, and for an end which made sacrifices legitimate.

It must be added that the rigour of these Dictators appeared much diminished to Assia when considered from the rue de

Grenelle The chain was extended there, especially for a free passer-by who came and sniffed at it Dictatorship is light when weighed from without Assia's thoughts did not take it into account, for the moment Assia had nothing to do with the means, she saw the work and the ends Both excited her They were building a new world, to fit some hundred and sixty millions of human beings, who of their own will, or by force, were enrolled in the works The imbecility of the old world, incapable of opposing or accepting, had endeavoured to smother them by blockading them in their ruined house, and depriving them of the outside air They had taken up the challenge, and made the murderous necessity the law of their creative impulse From the ruins of the old building, were rising Babylonian structures of the Spirit that captures the forces of the elements The first outlines were appearing of the great Plans from which was to come forth that fauna of prehistoric monsters, the Dnieprostoi, the Avtostroy, the Magnitogorsk, who with their trunks and tusks, search the blood of water, air and earth, and all the nations of workers who give pastures to the great flocks of mastodons, the blast-furnaces, and factories and cyclopean dams A stern and fiery exaltation led these gangs to the fray, contracted their muscles and their foreheads, and instituted between them games of heroic rivalry, of which should be first to conquer the enormous task and make sure the indestructible foundations upon which should arise—and was arising day by day—the Supremacy of human labour, free, equal, and sovereign No sacrifice is disproportionate to such an end No present evil, no evil to self or kin, is too high a price to pay for the future good which they dream of, will, and build for all mankind in days to come Those in the West who lament, or wax indignant, at the destruction by the U S S R of gods, churches and religions, those dead would do better to bury their dead! Nothing more will come forth from those whited sepulchres They do not see, they cannot see with their empty eye-sockets that in

## THE COMBAT

the East, once more, a God is born ! This proletarian, Marxist, materialistic, atheistical youth, sacrificing itself with serious joy to the happiness and social welfare which shall be, when it shall be no more, has more religion in its hammer and sickle than the false devotees of the lying West in all their pater-nosters, clerical or lay Outside action, nothing but is a lie Deeds, alone, cannot lie By their deeds let them be judged, men over there and here !

In her passionate injustice, Assia thus made out the balance sheet of her Marc's life —Nothing She knew very well that his inaction was forced, that he suffered from it like an insect full of life fastened to a board with a pin But she had no pity when she saw that other insects had torn themselves, all bleeding, from the pin ! Let him do the same ! She would kiss his wounds heartily as she would have come near to kissing the scar which cut with a livid streak across the strong cheek of Dito Djanehidze

He was on a secret mission of the Komintern in France, with no official title, and feared by the officials At the Representation, where he came in, passed and installed himself without ceremony, he seemed to visitors a silent witness, rather in the way, and of no importance he smoked one cigarette after another, showing no sign of interest in the conversations, but the representative sought his eye before giving an answer He was tall and stout, with a heavy frame, but supple, noiseless movements A crop of thick strong, very black hair, growing low The forehead marked by a deep transverse furrow Strong, raised eyebrows Half-closed eyes that practised division of labour one said cunning, and the other hardness A long nose, broad at the top, fleshy at the tip, with thick, but tight nostrils A stiff moustache Broad cheeks The jaw on guard, sneering as it kept watch The whole physiognomy denoting raillery mingled with implacable observation—He was under forty

Assia was not slow in noticing him He did not seem to

## THE COMBAT

notice her. His double glance had indeed, picked her up, weighed her, fur and feathers, and dropped the game. He had better game to hunt. This had annoyed her. She conceived a violent antipathy for him. She pretended not to notice his presence. People sometimes stopped to talk in the room where she worked, and, with Slav familiarity, she would join in the discussion without interrupting her copying. Two or three times, Dito Djanelidze cut her short, fairly ungraciously, with an ironical remark. Assia raged, without showing it, pretending not to hear. He laughed inwardly, but no sign of the laugh was apparent.

One day, when she was working alone, he came and sat down at the other side of her table. She raised her head and saw his broad face with the searching eyes almost touching hers, and the banter at the corner of his mouth. But, this time, there was no unkindness in his irony. Assia frowned crossly. He laughed in her face. For all her efforts, she could not succeed in feeling angry any more. To save herself from laughing too, she bent her angry forehead and went on with her work. He spread his broad hand over the page and said

"Stop! Let's talk."

"But if I don't choose to talk?" she said.

"But you do choose."

She choked at his impudence, she stared him in the face and said

"No!"

"That means 'Yes'," he said calmly.

"In what language?"

"In yours."

And before she could answer, he offered

"A cigarette, comrade?"

His look, his tone, the word "comrade" conquered her. Unwillingly, she took the cigarette.

"I have my work to do. No time to waste."

## THE COMBAT

" Yes, you go at it    You would be more in your place with us "

" What should I do there ?    Do you even know who I am ? "

" Of course, I know "

" I was with Denikine's Whites "

" But you are not with them now "

" What do you know about it ? "

" I know "

She was so disgusted at his assurance that for a moment she would have liked to be in the other camp, in order to give him the lie    But she was too honest with herself    She had to be content with casting a furious look at him    Dito's throat moved with his silent laughter    She had lit her cigarette mechanically at Dito's, and chewed it with rage    She spat out the end she had bitten off and said, provoking him

" And do you know what I shall be to-morrow, too ? "

" It's evident    You will be with us    You are already "

He was not laughing now    And she kept silent    She was conquered    They smoked for a moment, in silence    She looked towards the window    It was clear enough, it was the only direction in which she could go    Towards that action of a nation—her nation—over there    She had known it for a long time    But he was the first to say it aloud, for her    She still tried to defend herself    She said, as if talking to herself

" I cannot accept any yoke    I would rather die than sacrifice my independence, I have suffered everything to keep it "

" And you got married," he said ironically

" My husband is like myself    He thinks as I do "

" And he got married," repeated the mocker

She wanted to parry the blow—she cheated

" Two are stronger than one," she said

" And a hundred and sixty million, how much more so ! "

It was what she thought    But her individualism rejected the thought



" But I can't marry a hundred and sixty million ! "

" Why not ? " he asked " You're hefty ! "

" I am," she said, " but it doesn't please me "

" It will please you "

She had accepted this tone despite herself She had to keep it up Her lips said (her ears were astonished to hear herself say)

" Comrade, what pleases me is my own affairs Do me the pleasure of looking after your own concerns "

" You concern me "

They stared into each other's eyes, chin in hands, blowing their cigarette smoke into each other's faces Assia said

" You've got a cheek "

" I have," said he

" What do you want of me ? "

" That you should serve us "

" The word ' serve ' is not in my papers "

" Yes, it is," he said , " you can't read "

She flew into a rage his tone of insolent assurance had exasperated her too long

" After all ! " she cried, banging her fist on the table, " do I dispose of myself, or do you ? "

" Neither you, nor I," he said, " but the law "

" What law ? "

" The law of Nature The law of combat Either for us or against us You are not able to be against us "

" I was able "

" You were not able ! "

" Don't defy me ! Or I will tell you all I have done "

" Useless Would you like me to tell you ? "

Leaning towards her, in an undertone, in clipped words, his teeth clenched on his cigarette, he flung at her, pell-mell, half a dozen little events which she thought were known only to herself, or had disappeared with those who had been accomplices or victims therein , some came from the forests of the

Ukraine, and others from her solitary garret in Paris The hair of her flesh stood up Her spine went cold, she stiffened.

"That's enough! Your informers have earned their bread Don't expect me to eat any of it! If I am a bitch, I am a thin bitch, I will remain so"

"They are the best," he said "I do not expect you to change Be only what you are! But dare to be it! Be it openly! You are not of those who can be content with indefinitely weighing pros and cons, like the tight-rope dancers of Paris"

He added

"Like your own husband"

She reacted to the sudden blow

"I forbid you to speak of him"

She looked like a cat with back arched, about to fly at his eyes

"There is no need for me to speak of him," he said, "you think exactly the same of him as I do"

"It's not true!" she said, "you are not worthy to tie his shoes"

He jeered

"I leave that honour to you But I have a notion that his shoes are badly tied"

"Do you spy even into my bedroom?"

He had stopped smoking He caught hold of Assia's arm, and said, in a good-natured, but serious, tone

"Enough of fooling, child! Let's talk without sparring! We have the right (or we take it) to observe anything that can be of use to us But it needs no spectacles to see that you and he are not made to drag the same cart Let me speak!

I am saying nothing against your stable-companion He has, or may have, every virtue But those virtues are not yours It is you that are rearing between the shafts You are right"

"I am wrong," she said, "he sees the goal as well as I do He is not afraid to make for it His heart is braver than mine

---

## THE COMBAT

---

But his brain is too full of those Western ideas, which beat against one's legs, and prevent one from advancing. He still needs time to free himself from them."

"We have no time. Let him decide. Or you decide! Bring him to us, or drop him! This is not the epoch for young Hamlets, stuck on the edge of the cemetery, 'To be, or not to be.' He who does not want to be, let him be buried! Pull him out of the hole, or shove him into it! But first, get out of it yourself! And come! You'll find substitutes for him."

She looked him up and down contemptuously

"You?"

"Me or another. No matter whom! I'm not after the succession. I've got something better to do. And so have you. Don't waste your time over trifles."

She said

"Brute!" drew away from him, and got up

He remained seated at the table

"The shoe pinches you. Let it pinch. What I say is true. Your private histories are of no account compared to the great history we have to write. When the stomach is hungry, let it be fed! But let it keep quiet! It is only one stomach, nothing more. And we have the whole human animal to serve, those millions of beings, starving, not only for bread and love, but for light and liberty

She said, opening the door to go out

"You dare to talk of liberty, you!"

Before the door closed, she heard

"We dare, we. Those who are incapable of climbing to it alone, we hoist up by force. We'll hoist you up."

She slammed the door

"No!"

That night she had an altercation with Marc, who called all constraint exercised upon the soul of another crime. He had

## THE COMBAT

only just discovered the Non-Violence of Gandhī She said, more clear-sighted in opposition than he was in admiration "And you can't see that it is violence upside down!"

He persisted, she persisted

"Everything is violence," she said, "even love Love above all It makes one a slave It makes one false to one's nature It is degrading"

"If you feel like that," he said, wounded, "free yourself!"

She said, with a bitter twist of the mouth

"Thank you for the permission!"

### VIII

She was back at her work, but she had sworn to refuse any further conversation with the bear She was not put to that trouble Djanelidze was away from Paris for a fortnight, and when he reappeared he took no notice of her She was piqued She had gathered information about him during his absence She was not the only woman whose attention was taken up by this individual He was feared and admired they talked about him with ill-natured fascination A good deal of legend was mixed with truth in what they told about his life, but as the proverb says, people only lend to the rich He was the son of a butcher in Baku, he took part very early in the outbursts, bomb-throwing and violent "expropriations", organized against public and private funds by the young Communist party of the Caucasus, round about 1905 He had been in prison five or six times, deported to distant parts of Asia, he had escaped, and had begun again In the days of October he was a member of the revolutionary War Committee, and, better fitted for action than speech, he was sent to every centre of the fire to stir it up, he had never jibbed at the most dangerous or thankless task, he never disputed with the ambitious or "vain-glorious" of the party for the meat of power what he

wanted was the bone to crush—the enemy (The enemy is everything that threatens the cause, and all means are good to suppress it. Action risked for the cause never has a bad smell.) He was of those who, noiseless and nameless, spread over the world a web of secret watchfulness, stealing flies from the other spider, the "Intelligence Service" of the British Empire. His strong physical life was easily satisfied, he would snatch a morsel anyhow, and might almost be said to sleep standing up, he had no time to hang about a woman. But when his practised eye discerned in passing a source of energy—a glowing coal-mine to capture for the service of the cause, he stretched out his claw, and stamped it, willing or unwilling, property of the State. He had stamped Assia. He might know nothing of her feminine nature, her humour, the desires that come of sex, for he took no account of the feminine, the "*ewig weiblich*", but he knew better than she did the "*ewig menschlich*", the strong instincts which, beyond the threshold of sex, spring from the knot of interlaced serpents of human entrails, the famished jaws of being, male or female, which are like an internal torch, burning to be, to grow, to create, to devour, to destroy, and to act. He had no need to place his hand on Assia's body to feel the torch burning within.

For all Assia's struggles, it was she who sought him out. One day, as he was going out without looking at her, she got up—all her papers were put away—and said

"Comrade, shall we walk together?"

They went out. Djanelidze took more notice of the passers-by than of the woman who kept pace with him. But certain questions which she asked him roused his attention, he looked at her. The fish was nibbling. Assia questioned him with anxious eagerness upon the problems of new Russia and the chances of the struggle on foot. She was not pretending. She was caught. And Djanelidze changed his tone, he could speak. So as not to raise his voice, he passed his arm through Assia's and walked along, bending close to her ear, a curl of the

woman's hair brushed his mouth, and Assia felt his breath entering her ear with his words. They never noticed that it was raining, till they were wet through. In order to continue the discussion, Djanelidze and Assia went into an old café for people with small incomes. He was in no hurry that day, he had finished his business in France, he was leaving on the following evening. Seated at a table at the far end of a room, three-quarters empty, and badly lighted, with wishy-washy tea before them, they talked quietly, with that volubility of tongue which the Slavs alone share with the Italians, untiringly, forehead to forehead, and she questioned him with passionate interest. But soon she ceased questioning, to listen better. And Djanelidze, feeling the interest he was exciting, let his heavy and powerful flood flow on. He told of the epic struggle of the U S S R against hordes of enemies, from within and without, sometimes he played an episodic part, but he spoke of himself as of another, or rather as a limb of some monstrous Myriapod. The central figure of his stories made one think of an ant-heap, and Assia, who had by instinct an aversion to the myriad, to her stupefaction, drank in the ecstasy of the nameless ant that participates in that multitudinous life. She lost her individuality by plunges into an oily, smoking, stream of naphtha, she struggled out, in starts of revolt, but she felt that she would fall in again, and the heavy voice of Djanelidze pulled at her legs, like a hand. All her conceptions tottered, and values were modified in passing from the plane of the individual to the collective. It was only later when she was alone, that she remembered, with dismay, this suction of the octopus. But that horror retained a sacred character, it was beyond her strength to judge it. Her reason was overtaken by the fumes of the beverage. Djanelidze's was used to it, long since. His brain was cold and lucid in intoxication. Perhaps Assia's vertigo was so strong only because she had found again the human river whose overflowing waters had swept her along years ago in that nightmare of defeat. But

---

## THE COMBAT

---

this time she was on the raft, sitting beside the pilot, and under her legs, between the planks, she could see the flowing water. She shut her eyes, dug in her nails, her head went round.

It was nearly nine o'clock at night when she found herself still sitting on a chair in a district bar, and remembered her home. She started, and said good night. She ran nearly all the way back. She expected to find Marc in the sulks, and admitted that he had some justification for it, the poor boy, with his French habits of order and punctuality! She was ready to apologize, though it was always a bone in her throat, to be obliged to render accounts. She had nothing to hide, she always told everything without being asked, but it did not do to question her. And she foresaw that the blunderer would not have the sense to hold his tongue. But, so be it! For this once she was ready to swallow the bone, she knew she was in the wrong.

She was spared the trouble. He put himself entirely in the wrong. She found a Marc exasperated by waiting, who had feared and imagined all sorts of things, and who received her with the airs of a judge. She immediately lost her laughing contrite inclination to explain matters affectionately. She went to her room, without a word, to take off her wet clothes, and then into the dining-room, to serve the cold supper with haste. He hung round her, with a fateful air, his throat dry, holding back his cross-examination. She saw him, under her eyelashes, without seeming to take any notice of him, she felt like shrugging her shoulders. Finally, he asked in a magisterial tone

“Where have you been?”

She replied curtly that on leaving the office, she had had an interview which had delayed her.

“Who with?”

“With someone you don't know!”

She felt herself that the answer was unsatisfactory, she looked up, ready to smile, and when she saw her big boy in

## THE COMBAT

torture, she went to him, to kiss him But he had scarcely touched her when he pushed her away in a fury He shouted at her

"You disgust me! Your hair and dress reek of tobacco Where have you been dragging them?"

She was annoyed, but she admitted that he was not altogether in the wrong, she said

"In a café the smell may have clung to me, but you might be polite"

He repeated

"In a café! You have been gadding about for four hours!"

She saw that he did not believe her She said

"Come, my boy!"

And she went to him again But the violent, nervous boy, strained almost to hysteria by a sudden fit of jealousy, drew back from her with disgust And he shouted

"Don't touch me!"

Assia said

"You're mad"

She sat down and began to eat He had gone into the next room, and did not come back Assia called

"Marc!"

He did not answer She finished her supper She peeped into the next room He was lying on a divan, and did not move The great baby! She said, pitying him

"Marc, will you listen to me?"

He replied icily

"It's no use, you would only lie"

Assia's blood rushed to her forehead She had not an ounce of pity left

"What on earth do you think?" she asked harshly

He made no answer

"Idiot!" she exclaimed with a hiss of contempt

She turned her back on him "Believe me or not!" She went into her room and went to bed He remained, lying



---

## THE COMBAT

---

in the other room, but several times, in the night, she heard him walking about. Assia raged, in her bed. Never, for an instant, had seduction entered into her conversation with Djanelidze, neither of them had even thought of it. And this idiot thought of it for both, he thought of nothing else, he forced her to think of it. Much use it was to spare him!

A diabolical malice made her think of "*the eel of Melun that cried out before it was skinned*". Cry out, my friend! You shall have something to cry out for. But the threat was merely verbal. She had not the least desire to skin him. The poor lad had a tender skin. Comparison with the other, the rough rasping hide of the wolf, thrust itself upon her, and a shiver went down her spine. She repulsed the wolf, but he was there, she could feel his hot breath on her face, in the dark. She turned her back, irritated. But he was there. The breath burned her neck. That fool, obliging her to think of it and draw comparisons! She went over the whole conversation of the evening, the heavy torrent of images and thoughts, that male, savage, muddy world, that new world, whose hide, nevertheless, retained the strong familiar odour of her native soil, and of the past. She sniffed it up with hypnotized repugnance, all her pores were impregnated with it. She got up in a fever to wash her face, hands and stomach. She got into bed again. It was the sheets that should have been changed.

Marc was moving about in the next room. She twisted and turned. "The fool! The fool!" She weighed him in the balance, against the other. He did not weigh much, with his stupid jealousy, his selfishness, his despotism, all his thoughts shrivelling round his own ego, me, me and me. "You belong to me, you are mine." "Belong to you?" I belong to nobody. If I give myself let it be to more than a man, to those great forces which upheave and lead a world! In these alone I find my way and my bed. I fulfil myself. And she felt round her thighs the clasp of him who was behind her. She was crushed as by a millstone, till she shrieked

---

## THE COMBAT

---

inwardly at it      She switched on the light, and sat up choking, her breasts swollen, breathing in heavy gasps

She got out of bed again, and sitting, half naked, in an arm-chair, recovered her self-control. She tried to explain to herself the enigma of this man who obsessed her, to take his mechanism to pieces. She tried to separate in him, that which belonged to himself, and that which belonged to the great mysterious, multitudinous Force, the working machine of which he was a driving belt. She persuaded herself that the machine was everything, the belt nothing. That one, or another, no matter which, would serve the purpose. She remembered what he had said to her—"Me, or another." She shook her head angrily. "Certainly, not you!" She examined him in detail, from head to foot, as if he stood there before her. She felt her own pulse. She did not cheat. Not an artery beat harder or quicker. Her heart was without desire. What do I care whether this man lives or dies!

She went back to bed, her breathing calm, her brain cool again. She slept till morning.

Opening her eyes, she went over the stupid misunderstanding. There was wrong on both sides. The tension had been increasing for some months, and while both acknowledged their faults, they had not the wisdom, or the energy, to change matters. Marc's unstable temperament was shaken by fits of anger, like nervous squalls, which shattered him, he passed from a disproportioned expenditure of passion to exhaustion, and that very fatigue no less than passion, laid him open to fits of fury. Assia had sudden alternations from obstinate silence to a flow of angry words, jealousies, susceptibilities, fixed morbid ideas, which coincided with her little tides, or were roused by a word, a clumsy gesture, to which her imagination, already wounded, attributed intentions which were not there. The inevitable result was brutal and frantic jars, in which both took leave of their senses, followed by a return to reason, and

---

## THE COMBAT

---

regrets, but rarely on both sides at the same time—yet, not for a moment, even when words insulting as blows ran highest, was great love absent. But it hid itself, shamed and wounded, in the depths of their hearts.

At that moment Assia recognized that she was not quite innocent of the exasperation into which Marc had fallen that night. Instead of appeasing his loving anxiety (by no means unjustified) lest Assia should be taken from him again by the alien soul of that Russia, which was closed to him, a bad instinct had driven Assia to stir up his suspicions. She had prolonged her absences from home beyond reason. She had invited to her house comrades, chance acquaintances, Russians of the Commercial Representation, whose familiarity and chattering with Assia in that language, which Marc did not understand, had caused him stupid annoyance, in the altercation which followed, he had gone so far as to forbid Assia to receive such visitors in his house (the words were hardly said when he owned to himself that he had exceeded his rights). The result had been that Assia received her comrades away from home. And the suspicions flourished all the more. Assia acknowledged herself just as stupid in having provoked them, for the pleasure of subduing Marc, and affirming her own independence. At that rate they were heading straight for catastrophe, she had sufficient experience to foresee it. They were mad. Holla, holla! Stop!

She got up, quite resolved to put things right. If Marc was a naughty boy with wild eyes, it was for her to bring him back maternally to good sense. In the depths of her heart he was more her child than her husband, and the best of the available reserve of love was entered to the credit of the child. But when she opened the door of the room where Marc had spent the night, he was not there. He had gone out, without leaving a word. Assia resented this, and her good resolutions were extinguished like a candle blown out. However, she forced herself to wait for him (perhaps to put him further in the

wrong) She gave up the idea of going to work at her office as usual. She owned to no regret, although it was the last opportunity to see Djanelidze before he left. But perhaps this thought incited her to stay away, in order to prove her indifference to herself. What did she care? She busied herself about tidying up the flat, it needed it! She was always out, and, day after day, dust and disorder spread over everything. She was in the middle of her cleaning when Annette came to fetch little Vania. (She took care of him all day, and brought him back in the evening.) But Assia would not let her in, upon the pretext that everything was upside down, and she did not want anyone to see her pigsty, she thrust the child to her through the half-opened door, Annette only caught a flying glimpse, in the dim passage, of the silhouette of her daughter-in-law, on her knees furiously polishing the floor, her head bent, her hair coming down and hanging about her cheeks in rat's-tails. She was revenging herself on the furniture for Marc's failure to come home.

He did not come in for lunch. She waited. He did not come.

"Idiot! You're sulking! I'll be even with you!"

She choked with impatience, as she swallowed the mouthfuls. She did not finish her meal. She dressed herself, she surveyed herself in the glass. She showed her teeth, sharp as a young dog's, at herself. She wanted to bite. She was ready to go out. What for? To see whom? That "whom?" took her unawares. She started. She sat down again, with her hat on, as if on a visit, and she took up a review from the table, she tried to get interested in it. To blaze with it, no go! Her nervous hand flung the review to the other end of the room. She tapped her heel on the floor. It struck three.

"I've had enough of this!"

She went out. She had no avowed purpose. She assigned herself that of visiting a white sale in some gallery. But she

---

## THE COMBAT

---

went in a different direction. She discovered it when she had gone too far to turn back.

"So much the worse! It will do some other day. But what shall I do to-day?"

She was within ten minutes of the Commercial Representation.

"It's too late. I won't go."

Yet she went in that direction. Of course, she would not go in. She had no need to go in. On the opposite pavement of the boulevard, within forty feet, she saw the broad shoulders and head of Djanelidze approaching through the crowd. She had a shock. She discovered that before seeing him she was going towards him. She was annoyed. She was frightened. She stopped stock still before a shop-window, with her back to the street. She was waiting till he had passed. He did not pass. He crossed the road, and without a word, stood beside her before the shop-window. He winked at her from the corner of his lowered eyelid. She turned and surveyed him. He did not seem to be looking at her. But his Mongol eyes were laughing. He said:

"Are you playing truant?"

She ignored the question, and said:

"I thought you were gone."

She was lying, and he knew it, she had asked him the time of his departure on the previous evening. He replied:

"I am going. I am on the way home to pack now. Then to the station. Are you free? Come with me."

But he did not take her arm, as before. He kept at some distance from her. He said, without looking at her:

"Don't appear to know me. I am being shadowed, or I may be."

He took all sorts of twists and turns, going up side-streets and passages that brought him back to the same boulevard, with a quick glance over his shoulder he made sure that he was not being followed. Yet he managed, in the double stream

of passers-by, to exchange a few rapid, caustic words in their language of "over-there", keeping his face in profile. When they had reached the threshold of a house at the corner of two streets, he glanced quickly all round him and said

"Let's go up!"

She hesitated. He added

"You might help me to pack my trunk."

He took her by the elbow and they went in. He pushed her on to the steep dark staircase. She could not see where she was going. He pressed his hand into the small of her back. The broad hand seemed to grip her like a bird. But it was no domestic fowl. She stiffened herself to hard resistance, ready for the stroke of the beak—also perhaps in order to feel the hand better. On the narrow landing he stretched his arm in front of her to put the key in the keyhole. He pushed the door and the woman. They were in a little untidy room, the window of which, looking on to the courtyard, was shut, and the curtains drawn. Djanelidze shared it for the time being with a workman (he changed his lodgings every two days). At this hour the room was unoccupied, the lodger only came in at night. All Djanelidze's things, linen and papers, more papers than linen, were scattered over the bed, table and floor. Djanelidze took them up in piles, and threw them into an old leather trunk, with a handle. He piled them up in vain, he would never be able to get them all in. Assia took the pile of things out and rearranged them. The vitiated air was stifling. Her back was wet with perspiration. She wanted to open the window, he objected, for fear of being seen by the neighbours. She took off her coat and undid the collar of her dress and tucked it in, he was in his shirt-sleeves. They spoke but little, and only about the task in hand, he passed the things to her, she folded them, sitting back on her heels on the floor, her throat and the nape of her neck bare, she was in a bath of perspiration. She turned giddy for a moment, she saw herself in bed the night before, and a warm muzzle

---

## THE COMBAT

---

breathing on her back She had just time to turn round , leaning over her, Djanelidze was sniffing her And his great claw fell upon her and flung her backwards

When she sat up again upon the floor, her eyes were wild, her mouth dry, her body burning, she had a savage air They did not exchange a word She did not think of accusing him, or herself It was written ! But it would not have done for him to risk touching her again The portcullis had fallen between them once more He understood it perfectly, for he had the rarest understanding, that of the body He stood away from her, and rolling a cigarette, he watched her at his feet, cold and gloomy, putting up her hair There was no pride of conquest in him He had neither prepared, nor willed the capture , nature alone had done it all , there was no need to linger over it

Assia finished packing the trunk from which some of the things had fallen out When all was in order, she closed the lid, he pressed it down, locked and strapped it She got up and put on her coat He said

" Go down It is better for you that we should not go out together "

She looked at herself in a pocket mirror When she was ready she went towards the door He held out his hand and said

" Good-bye, comrade "

She came back and put her hand in his While he held it (they looked gravely at each other, she with her hard forehead bowed, but eyes plumbng eyes), he said

" And bring us your husband ! I count on him and on you "

Such a remark, at such a moment, showed a strange lack of taste She did not even notice it He added

" He is trying to find his way It would be a pity for him to get lost You know the way Show it to him ! His place is amongst us "

---

## THE COMBAT

---

She did not answer. She agreed with what he said. She was grateful to him for saying it. It was only later that she realized that he must have had Marc spied upon. But what would have thrown Marc into a fury, hardly annoyed her, she had grown used to thinking that sort of thing quite natural, one has a right to get information! Her hand, still moist, responded to the pressure of his large hand, and freed itself. She said

"Good-bye"

And she went out

She walked along the street without looking back. It was the end of the day. The top stories of the houses, on one side of the boulevard, were reddened by the sunset. She was not thinking, she was too full for thought. She felt neither pleasure nor pain. Simply that the hard asphalt was good to tread on with her hard feet. At a corner near the Seine, which was flooded with the last rays of the sun, she stopped, struck by a blow

"What have I done!"

She recalled everything tumultuously, but only for an instant, and severely, without tumult, she made out her account. She bit her lip, humiliated. The debit was against her. She had played imprudently and lost. Lost? If it had merely concerned herself, it would not have worried her for long. One gambles and loses, one has lost, think no more of it! The thing in itself has only the importance one gives to it. Assia gave it none. Her chief regret was not for the fact itself, but because she had consented by surprise, when her will did not consent. She esteemed herself little for it. But she had lost her self-esteem long since. She was not tender to herself. Proud, yes. But proud of not flattering herself. If she had been alone, the account would have been closed before she got home. But she was not alone. At home there *the other*—he whose presence, whose existence were a bit that irritated her, but which she loved to champ, because to her,



---

## THE COMBAT

---

its iron taste lent a savour to life—the *other*, the partner whose name stood with hers in a joint account. What would he think of it? She knew how terribly serious he was in these matters. He judged of honour like an old *bourgeois*, and put it in places that honour had nothing to do with. Assia had been ironical to him on the subject for a long time. But though she did not own it to herself, that irony made him seem to her more worthy of respect. If she did not tell him of her stupid adventure, he would know nothing about it, he would be at peace, no one on earth would trouble him with it. But there! That was just the one course which was excluded. Assia had struck it out of her books. The fact in itself, the “delinquency” (whatever one likes to call it!) sat relatively light upon her. But silence about the “delinquency” was for her the real delinquency. No, no, she refused to take it upon herself. She was willing to wrong Marc, but she would not “be false” to him. For her “to be false” was solely to lie (or keep silence). She did not play false. She did not cheat.

She made up her mind, therefore, to tell him everything. So much the worse for her! She added *in petto* “So much the worse for him!” If it had not been for his silly behaviour she would not have gone out that day. She bore him a grudge for it. (She exaggerated!) She had made her decision. Noble instincts. Uprightness, horror of lying were mixed with it—and some less noble secret rancours, Who knows? Perhaps that unavowable psychological curiosity of the Slavs, which moves them to God knows what actions, to see what effect it will produce in them. “How would she and he react to it?” The experiment was dangerous. She knew it. But danger to her was but one more specious pretext to persist. The danger of an action made it legitimate.

When she saw Marc her resolve was shaken. She expected a continuation of last night’s misunderstanding. She found a Marc who had reflected or repented, a touching Marc, who

## THE COMBAT

begged pardon, with that beautiful humble, tender look that melted one's heart Assia was thrown out, she could only caress his face with her hands, which his lips caught as they passed Her soiled hands She drew them away and held them behind her back She was in a false position now to grant the pardon he begged She tried to put an end to these reversed parts She said

"That's enough, my boy! Let's say no more about it! It's long ago now, what belongs to yesterday is done with"

He was happy

"Then, it's said! You have forgiven me?"

"Yes," she said "And now it is for you to forgive"

He exclaimed

"That was done long ago!"

"Yes, for yesterday But for to-day?"

"For to-day?"

He was smiling She did not know now how to begin Yet she had prepared it all But now, face to face with him, it became terrible

"Don't look at me like that! You make it more difficult for me"

She turned his head the other way

"Say on!"

He did not take it seriously She could see, in profile, the smile on his cheek She stamped her foot

"You are stupid! Don't laugh!"

He turned his head again, in surprise

"What's the matter with you?"

She stared at him, with gloomy eyes

"I have been false to you"

He opened his eyes, not understanding

"No, not false!" she continued "I do not hide what I have done To-day I I have (she became confused Those bewildered, fearful, defenceless eyes, questioning her! )

"I don't know how it happened" (She might have said

## THE COMBAT

"I was caught," but her pride refused, she reacted, she became brutal, to make an end of it) "I have I have just lain with another man" (She had no need to name him She had drawn Marc's jealous attention to Djanelidze more than once, in her provocative accounts of her days at the Representation )

She saw Marc's pupils dilate, his lips open the blow needed time to sink in Assia's thoughts reverted to a street urchin whose hand was run over by a carriage wheel, as he was playing he went on smiling till the dreadful pain reached him and he howled

Marc did not howl, but his face contracted suddenly, the breath stopped in his throat He gasped

"You are lying!"

He entreated

"Say that you are lying!"

She was frozen with pride and fear

"I am telling the truth"

She could never have imagined that face A wounded animal, mad with pain, and murderous eyes Before she could make a gesture, he had seized her by the throat and was strangling her She made no attempt to defend herself

"Strangle! So be it! You have the right" She had not lowered her eyes It was he who lowered his He released her Such anguish in his eyes! That was much more terrible He stood, a few seconds, his shoulders bent, his arms hanging down, as if uncertain Then he took a few steps backwards, staggered, and sank down on a low coffer, near the window-ledge, he leaned forward and fell with his forehead against the window, he sobbed His sobs hardly sounded human It was like a beast mortally wounded Assia was overwhelmed She wanted to scream, to run and take him in her arms And she was paralyzed She could not utter a word, and her face was frozen The unexpected excess of this passion petrified her, but within, her heart was wrung like

---

## THE COMBAT

---

linen in a washerwoman's hands She had to stand, stiff and straight, with dry eyes, motionless, watching that furious agony It was torture such as no torturer could have imagined! When, with a jerk of her hips, she managed to free herself, when at last she was able to move her knees, and approach him murmuring

"My boy, my boy! If I had only known! Don't suffer so! It is not worth it"

He cut short his sobs, raised his head, showing a convulsed but implacable face, and said

"Get out!"

He had no need of any gesture His glance was like a fist He was flinging her out of the house

Here again, her pride did her ill service She made no attempt to explain herself She picked up her coat, which had fallen on the floor, she pinned her collar, from which his furious hands had torn the clasp, she said

"You are driving me away?"

He groaned

"Yes!"

He fell back against the window-ledge, his forehead buried in his hands

Silently, she went into the other room, opened and shut various drawers, gathered up a few things, here and there, and came back into the room, with a small bag in her hand, she took a last look at Marc sitting collapsed, she opened her lips to speak, she went to the door, opened it, turned back and cried

"Marc!"

He did not move She went out

## IX

On the landing of the next floor, her legs gave way, she

## THE COMBAT

leaned against the wall in the dark, and wept She wept like a river She wanted to go up again and say to him, as she said to herself

"It is a crime! What we are doing, what you are doing Is a fool's trick, a dirty trick, a reason for us to ruin our lives "

She would not admit that he had the right to turn her out

"Does he love me so little?"

She did not say "He loves me too much!" She recognized her offence, but she did not recognize that, in the balance, her offence should outweigh love It was such a trifle to her! And the worse outrage, so it seemed to her, she had committed against herself, not against him, if there was any betrayal, she had betrayed herself, not him That surprise of her senses, that infamous eclipse of her will Ah! If he could have seen at that moment, the torrent of love that poured towards him! She loved him much more now! Now that she had seen him suffer Now that he was suffering at her hands Her hands She felt once more the stinging pain of Marc's hands on her neck She longed to kiss them She went up three or four steps But her pride flamed up again She knew that other pride would be intractable No, she would not lower herself by pleading

"It is you who are driving me away Good-bye, then! I will not come back unless you call me back If it is for ever, for ever be it!"

She went downstairs again, with flaming cheeks which still bore the traces of hastily dried tears Her goat-feet tapped their heels upon the polished stairs She passed the *concierge* with her head high, without nodding And in the streets she braved the curious glances cast at her gloomy, flashing eyes, from which a few belated tears were still dropping She cared for nothing now She walked on without knowing where she was going Then she turned abruptly into the first hotel she saw—a dirty house of evil fame She took a room without

## THE COMBAT

looking at it, paid in advance, before going up, and shut herself in. A life finished! One more life! Good God! Whenever would these lives come to an end?

### X

Marc had not moved from the window-ledge, on which his head rested as on the block. The stroke of the axe would have been welcome. Not to be obliged to put his head back on his shoulders! If one could only cut off the memory of days and nights! But his brain was in a tumult. Hatred and sorrow were intertwined as a convulsive couple. And his bristling flesh quivered with disgust. Not a thought of pity or pardon for her whom he had just driven away! Not an effort to understand! The outraged male saw nothing but himself and the injury to him.

A little footstep came pitter-pattering up the stairs. Marc was on his feet in a moment. Vania was coming back. He must not see that anything was amiss. With hasty hands he dried his burning eyes and tidied up the things that had been knocked down in the brief tussle (he picked up the clasp of the collar), he opened the door on to the landing and leaned over the banisters. Annette called from below.

"Are you there, Assia? I am bringing him back."

He answered

"I am here. Thank you!"

"Is it you, my boy? Is she out?"

He answered

"Yes."

Vania had reached the top of the stairs. She added

"I won't come up. I am tired. Good night, my boy."

"Good night, mother."

He took Vania by the hand and went in.

He had to explain to the child that his mother would not

---

## THE COMBAT

---

come back that night, she had gone away for some time Vania was curious, and asked questions. When it appeared that he was satisfied, he would suddenly ask more questions which took Marc unawares. And Marc had to watch every word, for if he forgot and contradicted himself, Vania reminded him of what he had said before. Marc also had much ado to give him his supper and put him to bed. With clumsy hands, he undressed the little chap, who kept saying in a tone of superiority

"No, no, daddy, not like that! You don't know."

And he prompted him in the sacred rites of washing and the rest. These little worries served, at least, to distract Marc from his sorrow. And as to Vania, he was delighted at the novelty. Here they were, two men, alone in the house. It was an interesting situation.

The next day, Marc made him promise not to mention Assia's absence to his grandmother. He told the child that her journey was a secret, and the questions of Vania, who would not be content with vague explanations, gave him some trouble. He got muddled. Vania saw very well that he was lying. Something was being hidden from him, but he said nothing, he pricked up his ears and pointed his nose, like a little dog, greatly puzzled by this mystery, he ferreted about, without showing it. But he kept his word, he did not mention it to Annette, he did the same as his father. He lied, he even had the cheek to tell her that his mother was very well and was doing this, that, and the other, he was pleased to deceive her, he was conscious of playing a part. What part? He did not know. But he was proud of it. He was quite a man.

On the second day after Assia's departure, Marc received a long letter from her. Twenty pages, closely written, in pencil. She showed no desire to excuse herself or to return. But she felt that she owed it to him, to tell him exactly what had happened. She never asked herself how it would strike him as he read. She thought herself called upon to give him an account—

her last account With strange psychological immodesty, that disease of self-analysis by which Slav souls are possessed, she did not spare herself—she did not spare him—a single twist or turn of her conscience, she laid acts and thoughts stark naked before him When the wording did not satisfy her, she crossed out, corrected, completed She was determined not to spare herself, never thinking that this was not to spare him either She had to unburden herself She felt greatly relieved afterwards Even a hair-shirt is a loofah It rubs the skin and reddens it to blood

As to Marc, he turned livid and his hands trembled, as he glanced through this confession He scarcely took time to turn the pages, his feverish eyes could not have read methodically, as ill luck would have it, in this muddle of notes and corrections through which, in spite of all, the rigid honesty of the woman who had betrayed him was shown, his eyes fell upon a few lines of a frankness so stripped of any rag of covering, that he saw red, with a cry of rage, he rolled the twenty pages into a ball, which he crushed and tore with his fingers—he wished it was Assia's body—he flung it into the fire, and burnt it Afterwards, he regretted to his dying day that he had not read those pages to the end Whatever he might do now, he would never know the truth Assia would not confess twice

On a sheet, separate from the letter, which had escaped the fire, she had made a list of linen and personal belongings, which she asked him to send to the hotel She offered Marc the alternative of fixing a day and hour when she might come and fetch them No doubt there was a vague hope of meeting him in her mind But Marc made it his business to tear it out Hastily, he thrust all the things she asked for into a trunk, adding, like a slap in the face, all the portraits of her he possessed He sent it to her the same day, by a porter, under the name of Mme Volkov When Assia received it, the blood rushed to her forehead, she took her little case out of her bag, and out of the case a snapshot of herself and Marc, which they had had taken



on a happy day, and which she always carried about with her, she tore it to pieces, let there be an end of it!—As she lay awake in the night, she got up and hunted, even in the dust under the bed, for the pieces of the puzzle, but she had destroyed it too well, it was impossible to fit the pieces together again! Yet she kept them in an envelope, which she sealed, to escape the temptation of opening it again.

Marc went to the Commercial Representation, to strike the man who had defiled him, in the face. He had to hear that the cuckoo had gone back to the depths of the forest, and he was forced to feed alone for nights and nights on his unsatisfied thoughts of murder.

Meanwhile, Annette, whom the pair persisted in leaving in ignorance of what had happened, grew uneasy at never seeing Assia, and in the end, she managed to drag the truth out of her son. It was in his flat, in his bedroom, after supper. The child slept—did not sleep—in the next room, a kind of alcove with no door. They had to speak low, their elbows on the writing-table, sitting side by side, in the circle of lamp-light. It did not take many words to make Annette understand. She cut his bitter confidences short, she could neither ask for nor answer them here, she feared the child's ears, and she would not let Marc's lips utter the insulting words which he was longing to pour forth. The little that was left to be saved from the ruin must be saved. She suffered with her Marc, but she was a woman, and she suffered also for the other, before she had heard her, she did not completely exonerate the man, one must hear both sides. Long since, she had feared such an end to this love, and now that the end had come, she felt more pity than reproach for the culprit—for the two culprits—the two victims. Naturally, she could not tell Marc what she thought. She put her arm round his neck. They were silent, but she felt Marc's cheek tremble. He feared nothing more than to show his weakness. He feared also that his mother might pity him while reminding him. "My poor child, didn't I tell you

so ! " As soon as he was sure of his voice, he hastened to adopt a severe tone to discuss his domestic arrangements " Annette would take the child to live with her, Marc would not keep on the flat, he would give notice the next day, and he would go to an hotel, provisionally, such furniture as he had would be stored meanwhile " There was no mention of Assia It was Annette who reminded him that they must first consult her Marc would not hear of it He said harshly

" She no longer exists "

Annette said, with a movement of her chin towards the child's room

" She is here "

Marc drew himself up

" She has no further claims on him "

" It does not lie with anyone to deprive her of them," replied Annette gently " No more than anyone could have deprived me of my claims on you "

Marc would admit of no comparison

" It is she, she herself, who has renounced them "

" No, my boy, let us not confuse matters, wife and mother are two things of a different order "

Marc, indignant, found himself up against the secret freemasonry of mothers

" Then you take her part against me ? "

" My boy, you are myself But even one who offends us has rights "

" I do not recognize them," said Marc

" You are in the fight," said Annette, " right is silent, there is nothing left but might But you are not the stronger "

He protested

" Is she, then ? "

" Neither she nor you But he " (Again she pointed to the child)

" He is mine ! " cried Marc " Mine alone Or I want nothing more to do with him ! "

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"He is his own," said Annette "And I am his"

She had some trouble in ferreting out Assia's address Marc did not give it to her, and she would not ask him for it, so as to leave herself free to act

At last she discovered the vile lodging which Assia had chosen haphazard, what did she care which it was? She was not particular, and the disgust which she nursed at that time for herself, for Marc, for all men, made no distinction between better and worse the whole of life was vomit Her mind was more disgusted than her senses by the idiocy of the adventure Not her adventure (a sordid insignificant accident like being splashed in the streets), but the whole idiotic Adventure, without sense or sequence, of life Yet that Adventure which she despised, Assia was not the woman to cast aside, half-way whatever it might be, Assia would follow it out to the end

She happened to be in her wretched room (she never stayed in it except to sleep), when Assia knocked at the door Assia showed no pleasure at the visit She had her cap on She was just going out, she did not offer the only chair, on which her things were piled The dirty, unswept room, the unmade bed, the filthy bedside cupboard half open, a litter of things scattered in every direction, showed an overwhelming disregard of all material and social considerations It gave Annette a lump in her throat Without a greeting, refusing to see the outstretched hand, Assia drew back to let her in, and with her hands resting on the rickety table, on which she was half sitting, she stared at her visitor, frowning, with a fierce look Annette was disconcerted for a moment The words of sympathy froze on her lips Assia said

"Are you satisfied?"

She gave a cry

"Assia!"

"What?" replied the other "Hasn't everything happened just as you expected?"

She held out her arms

"My daughter!"

Assia turned pale, her whole body quivered, her hard frozen expression was convulsed, and she burst into sobs. The effort she made to choke them back distorted her face to grotesque ugliness. But Annette never thought of finding it ugly, it was more moving to her than the most beautiful countenance. She threw herself upon Assia and embraced her. Assia, her hands clenched on the table, made no resistance, her body shaken with sobs, sniffing with her cheeks dripping wet, and eyes and nose streaming. Annette kissed her cheeks, eyes, and nose. Assia, completely conquered, rested her heavy forehead on the mother's shoulder, wiping her face against the dress.

When she had wept her fill, Annette sat down with her, finding room on the unmade bed, and held her clinched hands, the nails of which dug into her occasionally with starts of violence. They had not yet exchanged twenty words. Nothing had been said. All was said. Annette solicited no confession, she was not one of those good women who need to question. "My poor child, how did it happen?" She knew too well, there is never anything very new nor very appetizing about the tale for a woman who has lived. But Assia could not refrain from telling her. Willy-nilly one had to listen. And as Assia unfolded her tale, she recovered her nerve, and her silly pride of battle took possession of her once more. She made her confessions with an air of bravado, she did not excuse but accused herself. Rightly or wrongly done, she had done what she liked. She had the right. (And she insolently challenged the mother's eyes.)

"The right to hurt those who love you?"

This remark, made in an undertone as if to herself, unhorsed the teller in her gallop. She stopped for an instant, then as if she had not heard, recovered her seat in the saddle and continued on her course. Annette listened without flinching, even when her son was in question—save for putting her hand

over Assia's mouth, to stop the flow of uselessly brutal words, which the savage let out without reserve, like the toads in the fairy tale

"Don't soil your lips!"

"The dirt is in my heart, and I am spitting it out," said Assia, rubbing her mouth against the palm of Annette's hand. She was not the woman to deny that dirt is dirty, but she took an inverted pride in displaying it, that secret pleasure of so many women to-day in airing their turpitude, like the dirty rags which are hung out like banners in the streets of the South. It is an *Ersatz* for the old abuse of indecent confessions at the window of the complaisant, surpliced listener, in the favouring shadow of the church. Annette said

"Take in your linen! Don't let it drip on the heads of passers-by!"

Assia's open mouth did not finish the sentence she had begun. She was abashed and vexed. She was about to retort. Then she sniggered in spite of vexation and chagrin. And she said

"Where do you expect me to put it?" (She waved her hand round the miserable room) "I have no dirty linen basket"

"In the fire! In the fire!" said Annette. "And it wouldn't be a bad plan to throw everything here in with it"

"And myself too," said Assia, "if I had my way! But then I don't see why I shouldn't throw in the whole of Paris as well!"

"Patience!" said Annette. "But let us look after ourselves first"

The conversation continued in another tone. Assia had given up the idea of finishing her story. The story did not interest Annette, Assia realized that Annette knew as much about it as she did. But she returned obstinately to the question of her rights, in a free and loyal union. She might have lied and held her tongue. She did not lie, and she had

## THE COMBAT

not kept silent And indeed why should she ? She had acted within her rights

"The strict right," said Annette, "is here, as it often is, supreme injustice For it is the sin against love And true love is the supreme law"

"Then why should he," persisted Assia, "he, your son, be the privileged part—to stand upon his strict right, against me, against my right, and my wish ?"

"Because he is the weaker," said Annette

"The weaker !" exclaimed the other

"Every man is," said Annette

"Do you think so ?" asked Assia, in surprise

"You think so too"

Assia was silent She reflected, she said

"Yes"

She was astonished to find herself agreeing She tried to defend herself She went on

"But is that a reason why the right of the weaker should have the best of it ?"

"Yes, for my heart And for yours It is so We are the mother We must have pity on our child"

Assia's heart thrilled She said no more that day Annette got up

"I came to speak about the other child"

"Which ?" asked Assia At that moment she only thought of the grown-up child

"Vania," said Annette, in a tone of reproach

Assia made a gesture of indifference The passionate woman had no time now to think of the little one She said

"He is yours Naturally you take him"

"Assia !" exclaimed Annette, "do you love him so little as not to claim your share ?"

Assia's heart reopened She saw the child again, and suddenly hungered for him Her eyes flamed She held out her trembling hands

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"Give him to me ! I want him !"

But almost immediately tears came into her eyes and her arms dropped in discouragement

"What could I do with him here ? No, keep him ! You are better fitted to bring him up"

Annette asked

"You have decided never to come home again ?"

Assia cried

"Never !"

All her rancour against Marc reared up again, like a serpent on its tail She darted a look of hatred It hurt Annette, but she thought

"Whatever has he done to her ?"

Assia felt that her dart, to reach Marc, had pierced the mother's heart She quenched its burning point And with gentler bitterness she said

"I have no home Nothing there is mine any longer"

"You choose to forget," said Annette, "but I do not forget that half of what is there is yours"

"I had nothing when I went there I take nothing when I leave"

"If you go," said Annette, "I cannot agree that Marc should leave you without providing for your needs"

"In the first place," she replied, getting on her high horse, and drawing herself up so as not to lose an inch of her stature, "in the first place, I am leaving Marc, Marc is not leaving me In the second place, it is I who have kept the home going for the last three months He was not even capable of earning his bread Do you suppose that I could go and pick up his crumbs now ?"

Annette felt that she would get nothing from the proud creature, if she did not take some roundabout way She said

"Let's say no more about it ! But is it just to make me pay for any harm Marc may have done you ?"

That Annette, instead of accusing her, could, in compliance with Assia's rancour, accept the possibility of the blame lying with Marc, touched Assia, and was like balm to her, she felt an impulsive rush of gratitude. She seized Annette by the shoulders

"Who said that? No question of that!"

"Then, if you leave him, is that any reason why you should leave me?"

Assia squeezed her arms

"I am not leaving you. I don't want to. I can't."

"Nor I either. I can't, nor do I want to."

"Is it true?"

Assia hugged her with transport

"Then," said Annette, "let it be understood that my home is neutral ground! You will come whenever you like. And (I understand your pride, but you need not be proud with me, and even if it should cost you something, you owe me that sacrifice, at least) when it so happens (it might happen to any of us nowadays) that you need a little butter on your bread—or bread without butter—come, quite simply, and eat with me."

"I will," said Assia. "But you are not much more sure of the morrow than I am."

"Well, let it be turn about!"

"Done!"

Assia was not deceived by the bargain, she felt its generosity. She devoured Annette with her ardent eyes.

"Ah! what a pity that it isn't you I married!"

"Thank you!" said Annette. "I would rather not."

She went towards the door. Assia growled

"If only one could never have anything to do with these men!"

"Yes," said Annette with teasing calm, "but that will hardly be to-morrow! In any case, it will not be for you."

"Why?" said Assia flaring up. "I want no more of them."



May the devil burn them like the foxes in the Bible !  
And if I take up with them again, may my vineyard burn with them ! ”

“ He who has drunk, will drink,” said Annette

“ In any case,” said Assia, her hatred flaming up again,  
“ not of your wine ! I spit out Marc ! ”

And she spat

Annette shrugged her shoulders and went away Assia caught her up impetuously on the stairs, nearly knocked her down, hugged her once more, and whispered

“ Pardon ! Pardon ! ”

Annette, leaving the house, said to herself, with pity and irony

“ Only those who love can hate each other like this ’

And raising her eyes to the Too-High, to the far off, the deaf and dumb, she prayed

“ *Libera nos ab Amore !* ”

## XI

The life cut in pieces—the two of the disjoined couple, the child of both, the mother of all three—went on once more, pulling in different directions There was too much life in the pieces for life to stop But the more life there is the greater the capacity for suffering The only one who was spared suffering was the child He had no cause to complain of the change In his grandmother’s home, he was the little household god people seemed to be trying to make up to him by spoiling, for that which he was unconscious of having lost But, like all children, he was too knowing not to have realized his interesting position from the very first, and not to take advantage of it As to the real meaning of the adventure, he did not understand it, but one could not trust too much to that, if he did not know, he kept his nose to the wind, curiosity surpassed all other feelings in him Not at all

upset ! It was a very amusing game finding the scent But one more game among many He turned from one to another without following the hare At long intervals his mother, or his father, came to see him, both equally busy and on edge, with knitted brows, they felt called upon to bring him presents, each in turn, and they kissed him much more heartily than when he lived with them He let them do it one must be nice to the grown-ups ! He loved them as something belonging to him, puzzling, interesting, and not too bothering, but he did not want caresses much But natural guile made him none the less skilful in exploiting their rivalry (He felt it without understanding it) Both shut themselves in separately with Annette, and held long conversations However much they lowered their voices, the little ear always managed to glean a word And the word was put away in his cupboard until he had a heap Then he sorted, adjusted, and pieced together But, God be thanked, he grew tired and left the task incomplete, incoherent, to seek some other amusement

Annette had succeeded in preventing any official deed of separation between her two grown-up children at enmity Divorce was senseless between two people neither of whom possessed any property except the child (if that were an asset !), whom Annette, solving the difficulty, had taken to herself And the procedure meant a waste of time, of which they had none too much in which to earn their bread, to say nothing of the disgusting intrusion of the prying eyes of Society between their sheets They tacitly agreed to do without it They needed no social sanction to declare themselves separated Annette was careful not to urge them to it She was reserving her plans

Meanwhile, she took good care that they did not meet in her home, and tried to seem to hold the scales equally between them They must not be able to fear that she was trying to influence them, she must let their evil passions expend themselves, so much the worse, if they led them to deplorable

errors, to revenge themselves, or to assert their liberty! Marc and Assia would be the first to regret them, if no one called upon them to do so. There are faults from which a third person cannot save you, everyone must pay for his own experience with his own coin. Annette laid upon herself the difficult obligation of not seeing, of not knowing, of never appearing to interfere in their private life. Their pitiful disorganized life, ready for every folly of the moment, if they had not had to steady it, the feeling of the presence (near or far, at their pleasure) of this peaceful zone, where they would never be called upon to render an account before entering—where no one would try to detain them. “Come when you like! Go when you like! You owe me nothing.” Neither of them abused it. But they knew that they had this haven, where they could relax their strained nerves, and rest, for a while, their weariness of body and mind.

And this refuge would not have sufficed, if they had not had another curb, which prevented them from abandoning themselves to the traitorous soul—poverty, hunger which gnaws at young stomachs, and leaves eager dreams, desire, and the ennui that engenders them no time to browse. Every morning they must start out again upon the hunt for a pittance, and every night fall into harassed sleep upon their hunger.

Assia was doing shorthand and typing of lectures and speeches at 230 words a minute, five to seven hours of unrelaxed tension. It took all her indomitable energy, and her organism of tempered steel—hearing, fingers and brain. But how many failures before becoming perfect in her apprenticeship! She came away depleted, with sunken eyes, unable to think, words, printer's type, defiling across the screen at a triple gallop. Stop! Stop! It was enough to make one put a hole through the screen. Yes, a bullet in the temple. She sold her Browning, so as not to risk being tempted. And then (one dies, or gets used to it) she got used to it. When one becomes expert, a quick and ready

## THE COMBAT

intelligence that knows how to seize or make opportunities can make an independent position for oneself, fairly well remunerated one gets sent to congresses and missions abroad But meanwhile, how many lean kine ! She was one of them, when she saw herself all skin and bone in Annette's bath For Annette possessed that luxury, and Assia did not hesitate to make use of it It was the only thing she would accept But Annette managed, when she had her safely there, to put into her, by consent or surprise, some substantial hunk of bread and meat, which she devoured, while she protested that she was not hungry Vania had seen through the game, and when his mother came as he was having lunch, he would hold out a piece on the end of his fork, saying

"Open your mouth !"

Assia hesitated whether to laugh or get cross, but he looked innocent, she puckered her forehead and opened her mouth the morsel soon went down Annette would push a chair against her legs, Assia found herself before a plateful, which she polished off, while she said no She had a wolf in her stomach But one must pretend not to notice it She pushed back the plate abruptly, and got up, irritated

She persisted in her rancour against him whom she had deceived No ! not deceived wronged Not that either ! She would not admit that he had a right Offended ? (So be it ! if he likes I have revenged myself) Revenged herself, for what ? She wished that she might be asked, so that she could answer herself, and pour out the obscure and troubled thoughts beating at the door of her brain She was even indelicate enough to let Annette perceive this rancour, in order to provoke a counter-attack Annette took no notice Never a word in reply The fire went out, for lack of draught in the chimney Assia carried her undischarged resentment back to the dirty room in the hotel (She persisted in not changing it)

But by a strange revulsion of the heart, she had never set

---

## THE COMBAT

---

foot in her office again, since she had separated from Marc, and she fiercely thrust the image of the other man out of her mind.

However curious, even to immodesty, she might be to see into the depths of her secret feelings, she avoided examining herself upon the subject. It took a sudden fit of rage on receiving a post card from Djanelidze, to make the consciousness of the thoughts she kept under lock and key emerge from the closed door. The card—three insignificant words "Arrived safely Thanks"—was instantly thrown into the lavatory, and Assia pissed on it. She was bristling with dreadful hatred. And she perceived that her rancour against Marc no longer existed. It was all directed against the other. Making up her mind at last to examine the obscure feelings which she carried at the bottom of her sack, she found herself terribly deprived of all her arms, and of the grievances amassed against her companion. If till now she had claimed a credit in rancour against him, she had paid herself, they were quits. She admitted (what she had always refused to recognize) that she had betrayed him. Not so much in the way that he and others regarded it. The fact was much less important than the thought. The fact concerned herself, not him, it was for her to settle it, or not, with herself, her own contempt and disgust sufficed her to judge it, to judge herself, he had nothing to do with it. But the serious offence was that before the fact she had betrayed Marc for months in thought, she had deserted him, far from him, alien and hostile, for nights, nights when she lay beside him in the same bed. What was the fact of a moment's surprise, beside this long, persistent and deliberate treason of the mind, setting its teeth in silence? The fact had not so much sealed it as broken the seal. Yes, it had even relieved Assia of that interior treason. By a paradox of nature, it was at the minute—that minute without yesterday or to-morrow—when Assia surrendered herself to the alien embrace, that she freed herself from her traitorous obsession, and recovered her great, deep, faithful, and only love for Marc.

---

## THE COMBAT

---

But no one but herself could have understood it, and even Assia had fled from the thought. She had mobilized all her hard and evil forces of revolt, to ward it off. But to-day the thought had entered the breach. Assia kept it to herself. There was no question of telling anyone, to try and change anything. What was done was done, Assia had the pride to endorse the foolish bill, which she had signed, the consequences of her faults. But though for herself she did not in the least modify her view of the act which had provoked the rupture, love, which she no longer restrained, love for Marc, worked the miracle of teaching her to consider her own actions from Marc's heart, not from her own. And she espoused the resentment against herself and Marc's suffering, which condemned her—though alone, face to face with herself, she thought

"It was my right" (She persisted in it) "And it counts for so little! Wipe it out!"

But it was no longer her right to wipe it out. It lay with the other

"Poor boy!"	My great baby!	He hates me
I know him	He will never forgive me	So much the
worse for me!	So much the worse for him!	"

This consciousness once acquired, she accepted failure with Asiatic fatalism. The sentence was just. She had made a mistake. They had both made mistakes. One must not sit brooding over sterile regrets, or remorse. He could forgive her or not as he pleased! As for her, she had forgiven him. And now to start out for the rest of her destiny! She went as reporter with a deputation to a Congress in Norway. She had an incredible power of rebirth—new birth. She left the broken shell of the past behind her.

## XII

Marc remained caught in it. He came of a race that keeps

---

## THE COMBAT

---

their account books They do not scribble their scores on detached scraps of paper They do not know how to forget

It must be admitted that in the adventure he would have more merit in forgetting than the other What she had left behind was the insult she had put upon him Marc ruminated upon it bitterly He could not succeed in rinsing his mouth clean of it He long retained the feverish taste of it, he smelt it on his clothes, it seemed to him that wherever he went, other people must smell it on him For a long time he was subject to sudden fits, which shook him with frenzy and pain, fits of jealousy, love, and wounded pride, intolerable memories If he was in the streets, he hastened home, and hid himself during these crises When Annette was aware of them she never tried to force her way in, she withdrew by an instinct that made her guess that, as a woman, she participated in that which prolonged the sharp poison of his wound And it was true At such moments his hatred for one woman extended to all women The mere touch of a woman's hand, the slight contact of a woman brushing past him in the street gave him a feeling of repulsion Like the old painters of the damned, he could have seen under every dress the voracious jaws of Hell—the *pute bête* that gnaws and soils man's flesh He was glad that his child was a son He could not have borne with a daughter But not an intonation, an imitation, unconscious or conscious (how can one tell with these young monkeys?) in Vania must remind him of her whose substance made up half of the child he had begotten He drew back or pushed the child brutally away He would sometimes go several weeks without seeing him again

In the obsession of that hatred upon which he fed, it was not only Assia's body that pursued him, that he pursued in thought in order to destroy it, it was her mind also Who can separate one from the other? For lovers, for haters, mind is flesh, mind may be smelt, chewed, touched, violated, one can tear it with the nails and teeth Marc was savage

## THE COMBAT

against Assia's One after the other he took up all her words, all her ideas, which, day after day, had crossed swords with his. He broke the steel, but he picked up the pieces to break them again, and he made his hands bleed with them. They were of hard steel, those ideas of Assia's! They defended themselves, they attacked him, even when broken, they went through his skin. They cut through all the better they left filings in the wounds.

Marc raged against the dogmas of Russian Communism with which Assia, without adopting them herself, had hostilely opposed him by reaction of rebellion against him, against his individualistic ideas (which, however, had once been her own), and against the life which he forced her to lead. He persisted, in consequence, and to feel himself further from Assia, in that individualism which she repudiated and decried. He sank himself up to the neck in it—till he could not breathe for unless one could unseal the gate that opens into the long tunnel of mystic initiation, at the end of which one could see a few stars twinkling in the dark night, one was walled up in oneself, free from all outside. Yes! But at what price? Between the four walls of one's cell! The life of the mole that digs its gallery under the ground. But the mole comes out of it. When these intellectuals, these individualists, who called themselves independent, came out, what molehills did they build?

In order to strengthen a *Credo* (or a *Spero*) already shaken by too many doubts and experiences, Marc, during these months, renewed his acquaintance with Féli cien Lerond, his former fellow-student at the Sorbonne.

He had won for himself in scientific circles more renown than hard cash, by his researches upon the reactions of nitrified cellulose submitted to different radiations. He carried on his work apart not only from all action but from all social rumours, absolutely indifferent to all the tragedy—likewise to the comedy, past, present, and to come, of France, Europe, and the whole of humanity. It would have been revolting,



---

## THE COMBAT

---

if this indifference had not been extended to himself, his comfort, his success, and everything that concerned him, outside his work. And he performed that work under the most thankless conditions, with no subsidy from the State, to purchase his instruments and to carry out his long and difficult experiments, upon a miserable pittance eked out by his own savings, in a basement room no wider than a cupboard, which he had to enter almost on all fours, at the corner of a hovel made of lath and plaster which was crumbling away and letting in the icy wind and rain through the cracks. He had to scrape together from his small salary enough to meet the most urgent expenses. He did so, without complaint or surprise, as if it were quite natural. Many other savants did the same, and had done so under every government, in all times. It would have seemed to them indecorous to make it public. It was a point of honour with them, they were like school-boys who despise those among them who whine and go and complain to the master. There is no merit in achieving results with the luxurious installations at the disposal of American experimenters! While they envied them *in petto* as they cobbled up their bric-à-brac with brass wire and pincers, they were proud of being French. The biggest joke was their attachment to the government, no more irritable opponents to any social upheaval could have been found, they held this attitude in common with all the worthy folk of the middle-class, who nowadays tighten their belts. laborious and sacrificed, they have nothing to lose by a change, and the mere sound of Bolshevism or Communism nearly sends them into convulsions! Do not tell them that their work, under such systems, would certainly be better valued and more justly remunerated! They refuse to hear of it. Like prudish spinsters, who always think that their virtue is threatened, they use their hands to protect their precious liberty. They never realize that the jewel is badly damaged! Every adventurer has been at it, both before and after the establishment

of Sacred Democracy on paper What is left is but what the pilferers have not cared to take All that is left to these old maids and to these worthy folk is their honour They value these leavings as the apple of their eye They live more on fictitious non-existent goods than on realities To keep up this illusion of unproductive property is the art of those who govern Those whom they fleece are grateful for the eloquence with which they protect this hidden treasure (well hidden, nobody suspects its existence !), their liberty

Free, free upon that word, thieves and victims are in agreement

Marc, who was not one of the least persistent in parading, against Assia, the liberty which he did not possess (he stiffened his neck, and decked himself out in it like a cravat), discovered its grotesqueness now that he saw it round Félicien's neck, and he saw that it was choking him

"Silly idiot!" he cried, "there's a lot to be proud of! For all you get out of your liberty!"

The other looked at him with angry eyes Then he assumed an air of dignity

"It is not a question of profit There are other values in the world"

"What are they? Your beautiful soul? Old coquette! Do you smile at it before your looking-glass? The world doesn't care a straw about it!"

"I don't understand you," said Félicien, placid but pained "I have always known you jealous of your independence Whom or what have you got a grudge against now?"

Marc felt ashamed, it occurred to him that his aggressive tone was ricocheting of Assia's stones aimed at himself, he blushed, then he was seized with an inclination to laugh He was revenging himself for his defeat upon the back of his own caricature Recognizing the hidden motives of his animosity did not make him more indulgent On the contrary, he persisted in trying to prove to Félicien that his pre-

---

## THE COMBAT

---

tended liberty was worth little or nothing With signal bad faith, he reproached this ascetic of science, married to poverty like St Francis, for not coming out of his cell, his disinterested labour, to go to war against Society, and condemn social iniquities Félicien listened, placid, astonished, round-eyed, as he polished his eyeglass He was gentle, gentle, very gentle Great clumsy hands, skilful in manipulating his phials, a thick-set body, awkward gestures, and short, wobbly legs, head over tail, seated thought He answered

"Eh! what could I do? What could anyone do? I'm not Einstein or Langevin Even they, what good are their protests! They would do much better to stick to science Nothing can compensate for every hour they waste away from science Science is our home One must stay in one's home"

"Sweep in front of your house, at least, as the man of Weimar said!"

"No! Can you picture me sweeping the street? I have quite enough to do keeping my operating instruments clean and verifying my weighings Every man to his trade! If everyone stuck to it, the world would be none the worse!"

"That's what the sharks do"

"The little fish too"

"And you think it's right?"

"The world is like that I didn't make it *We* will never change it"

"You make it worse Your science is at the service of the sharks You are the accomplice of the assassins What do you care that your study of organic nitrified derivatives and the effect of radiations upon them serve to elucidate the question of the stability and preservation of gunpowder? All the materials necessary for destruction, its explosives, its asphyxiating gases, its yperites, tolites, melinites, phosgenes, and arsines, it's you idiot-genuses that furnish them"

"The same products that can destroy can cure or serve mankind Factories of dyes, perfume, or pharmaceutical

## THE COMBAT

products It is not our fault if good and evil are the two sides of the same coin It is a fact We verify, explain, and proceed to analysis and synthesis, it is not for us to take sides "

"Impassive like Nature? Spawning monsters, monsters, yourselves "

"Go it, go it! The hydra of Lernæa "

"You are its heads "

"And it would just suit you to be Hercules? "

"Ah, why haven't I his biceps? All that counted in man's history, his reason for living, was to conquer Nature But nowadays the conqueror is conquered You betray You should all be stuck on a gibbet "

"Would you destroy science? "

Marc said, with fury

"It is the whole of civilization that must be destroyed "

"Damned Bolshie! Go to Moscow! "

"And why not? "

He bit his tongue He raged at what he had said But he would not go back on it He said

"Make a clean sweep "

Félicien, mocking, still placid, piled it on

"Creation must be done over again False start! Begin again "

"Not I!" said Marc "Once is enough I'm going to hook it! "

He slammed the door as he went out Félicien jumped and swore

"Here, damn you! Do be careful! You'll smash my crockery! This shanty can hardly hold together! "

The quiet man flew into a fury in his turn By reaction, Marc was freed from his He laughed

"He loves his phials better than mankind "

But he was not proud of the part he played He had been whipping himself on another's backside And, to crown all,

he had consented to use Moscow's canes for the purpose  
He started with indignation

"Never! Never! They shan't *have* me!"

Two little working-girls who were passing called back at him

"They have *had* others!"

He turned round, disconcerted They were a long way off by now, they were hurrying, but as they went one of them turned her neck round like a stork and put out her tongue at him

"And they'll have you!"

## XIII

"They shan't have *me*! Nor you either, little females (cursed be the female smell! All the rest of my life will not be long enough to wash me clean of it! ), neither you nor the big males of Moscow I won't surrender Like the old Guard And I won't die But I won't say the Maréchal's word to you! But to those neuters of thought, those savants who proudly, stupidly practise 'science for science's sake', careless of the results to humanity"

And as luck would have it, stopping before a bookstall, grumbling to himself, as he turned the leaves of a book signed by a famous bacteriologist, his ever-roving eye caught the burlesque portrait of the savant, drawn by himself, engaged in creating an infectious disease all complete So far, alas! the microbite had not managed it, he deplored that he had not yet succeeded in "*brilliantly filling up this lacuna*" to transform a saprophytic microbe into a pathogenic microbe He consoled himself with the thought that he had, at least, achieved the brilliant success of restoring their virulence to pathogenic microbes that had lost it, and even of raising that virulence to a degree of activity hitherto unknown He was

well pleased with the graduated system of cultures and slow and progressive inoculations, by means of which he had achieved this exploit, passing from a young mouse to a full-grown mouse, a young guinea-pig to one full-grown, then to a sheep, then to a dog—to be continued in our next—Man, to-morrow !

Marc burst out laughing                      Now then, Molière ! And what are you waiting for, Jules Romans ?                      Then he remembered that in these dark days, when war by gas was suspended over Europe, not one of these great intellectuals, even those most desirous of avoiding it, would consent to subordinating the researches of science to the public safety Science *über alles* ! And his rancour flared up again It is not enough that these maniacs of intelligence entrench themselves behind their disinterestedness They are saving their souls ? I am glad of it ! They are ruining my life I would prefer them to ruin their souls and save my life, and the lives of others                      They have misused their powers They will have to render us an account, and the account will be heavy The proletarian society of the future will have the right to put them in chains—or at least under the control of a Council of the Community And perhaps executions of laboratories will be imposed, and interdictions on researches Why not ? *Primum vivere*                      The Dictatorship of Public Safety over science

Marc was once more on the road to Moscow He swore "No, no, and no !                      I mean to safeguard my individualism, but not by shutting myself up in it like a tower " Félicien's tottering tower, with his phials and furnaces He recalled it with Assia's cruel smile                      But the smile was aimed at himself Irritated, he brushed it away with the back of his hand, like a fly                      The fly came back It came and settled on his mouth                      His mouth smiled bitterly at the vanity and inanity of that individualist attitude, isolated from the rest of mankind It would not matter that individual

salvation was a sin of selfishness, if only it was possible. It was not possible—it was nonsense. How save a branch of a tree if the tree is condemned? Admitting that it might remain green when the tree dies, it is only a last flicker, it will soon wither too. Marc up against his *self*, and sounding it, recognized that that self owed its sap, and duration to the channels rising from the self of the community. To save oneself, one must save the *self*, or perish with it—But the geniuses, in the nations and ages that die? Yes, they are the bottle thrown into the sea, the last appeal, when all is lost! And even so one must have an appeal to throw in! What have I to say, I, Marc, that is worthy and capable of surviving? And if I have nothing (if I have nothing yet. Later, who knows?) is it not my only duty to fight, till the last moment, for the sinking ship?

There is no excuse for standing apart from those who fight but genius or sanctity, which are not within the reach of the generality of men, and they imply a much more difficult combat, by transposing the combat to the plane of eternity, that requires complete renouncement and sacrifice.

"Beyond my strength," said Marc. "I must will only what I can do. But I must will all that I can do, and I do will it. Since I want to save my branch of liberty, I want to save the tree. Since I want to save the tree, I want to defend its roots against the gnawers. I want to act, and expose myself. Those who aspire to live in peace, sheltered from blows, in their padded minds, are cowardly, selfish little *bourgeois*. And the fine intellectual reasons with which they cover up their cowardice, make them still more contemptible. The only true individualism is that which is always ready to take risks, that which pays, that which loses in the battle, if it must. Why not? I am only a pawn on the chessboard. Others will fight after me. Our password is never to give in—to the last!"

To prove to himself, against Assia's insulting reproach which still pursued him, that his individualism was capable of action,

and that he was not branded with sterility, he looked for groups with which he could associate himself. Among the causes whose banners floated in the wind (he could have done very well without the banners! He mistrusted flags, but men must have tinsel), there were three which at once appealed to Marc's activity—the cause of Independence of Spirit—that of Peace, and that of Europe. They had in their favour that they had been tracked and persecuted during the War. Like Forain's Republic, they had been "*beautiful under the Empire*". But what remained of their flower? Suspicious but curious, Marc went to see. He found them in very bad company. The fair ladies, once forsaken, had now a numerous following. Marc forced himself to overcome the repugnance which he felt at approaching the Penelope's suitors—adventurers young and old, who had installed themselves in the lady's alcove, if not in her bed, which attracted them less than her table. In the first rank, were old professional politicians, whose invertebrate suppleness always succeeded in wriggling into parties of idealist action and immediately impregnated them with their own odour of stale fish.

To right and left, on every side there arose from the ground those molehills of the Internationalists of the mind, the Pen Clubs and Congresses of the Inkpot, Intellectual Co-operations and, towering above these mounds, the "Permanent Committee of Letters and Arts of the League of Nations". There was no question of scaling these summits, in the ranks of these Illustrious. Even supposing that the place had not been well guarded, as it was, it was too restful, the higher one climbs, the less one acts. The "Permanents" acted not at all: they "permanated", their seats were too comfortable! And Marc had remained too long, against his will, with his backside stuck to a chair, he needed to prove his existence to himself, by moving. He was tormented by an itch for action. It was below, in the plain, that he had more chance of meeting men in action.

He met some, in serried ranks, who bestirred themselves,



not without fuss, in their newspapers and international banquets. But it was on the subject of their professional interests, to safeguard their authors' rights, their editions, translations, their booksellers' propaganda they exchanged their cassia and senna. We cannot blame them, their desire to be read and sold is quite legitimate. One must live! But our Marc, less indulgent, could not see the necessity. He was not interested in idealism with a "yield." Let him think of the spoil who pleases, when the battle is over! But at the moment it is beginning. One must seek risks, not profits—It did not take him long to discover that this exclusive pre-occupation blocked action in his companions. It forced them to such caution that they accepted everything, and a bit over, from the world, including cudgels for the backs of others and the confiscation of liberty, so long as the world accepted them—that is their productions—and paid for them. It was marvellous how these sharp-eyed and professionally-expert men, were struck with instantaneous blindness, when it was a question of seeing social crimes when the culprits were "*the Amphitryon with whom one dines*"—or with whom one aspires to dine—the French masters of power, dispensers of cash and honours, and the dictators who owned a good table. A very small number of writers—always the same ones—were sufficiently lacking in appetite to protest. But their protests, thin as themselves and monotonous, to which Marc added his, woke no echoes, they were repeated every week, with the crimes they denounced. In the end, they passed unnoticed. Or the good public grew bored, saying "What, again!"—and stopped subscribing to papers in which the rain fell. They wanted barometers set at fair, and frogs on the ladder. They preferred Clément Vautel.

Marc himself became infected with the boredom arising from this rain of protests without action. They ended by becoming a funk hole for conscience, a side door one slipped through to escape the dangers of action, or a painful confession

---

## THE COMBAT

---

of impotence When he had signed a dozen, his heart failed him, and his angry hand broke his pen on the *M* of his signature And instead of his name he wrote the word of five letters Manure is needed on that barren field of "Protestants" !

No manure was required to nourish the mushrooms in the bed of pacifism, which had sprung up suddenly in a night Marvellous yield ! But yesterday peace was banned To mention it was a crime of treason And to-day it was quite the style All were hurrying to stick the flower in their mouths like the cigarette girls of Seville—or at the point of their pens These doves of the Ark came from afar ! There were some who ten years before had been crows of the battlefields, croaking to demand the heads of premature, unlicensed pacifists If you had expressed surprise, no doubt they would have replied that there is a time for everything, yesterday, war, to-day, peace Marc, whose native "inopportunism", inherited from his mother, suspiciously smelled out all "opportunism" at twenty paces, observed with troubled eyes the sudden rush of these strange "guardians of the peace" Where did they get their password ? He did not have to seek long The peace, officiously encouraged by the State, Church and University, was a right-minded peace—the peace that oils the mouths of those *curés*, whom the great masters of industry have established in their churches, built like a porter's lodge, at the gate of their factories, opposite the bar and brothel, so as to sanctify their exploitations, and instil into the exploited, together with syphilis and alcohol, evangelical resignation—the peace of signed and legalized robbery, the peace, with profits, of the treaties, the peace of the profiteers of peace (war profiteers of yesterday's war, and to-morrow's, they are the same people) Poor men are not of the confraternity They have nothing They are had They are given preaching instead of profits the God of the rich is always ready to let his manna of peace, idealism and love fall upon men with empty stomachs Old Jesuses of the Palais-Bourbon throw their

line for fish, while reciting their twisted Sermons on the Mount, they exhort fishes and fishers to love each other, the despoiled to sacrifice their possessions for the fair sake of Peace. As to preaching such sacrifices to those grown fat on the spoils, nothing doing! These old Jesuses had made the war—"Say no more about it! What is done is well done. We will do better. Peace on earth to men of good will! (The will is good when it leads to success!) And blessed be the established order!"

It was a question of convincing the conquered. More rhetoric was required, the conquerors' idealism no longer sufficed. Each of the conquered had his own, which was not written in the same key. They were out of tune. To re-establish harmony, other strings had to be played on, those of fear and common interests. Aptly named, *Pan-Europa* had come to re-establish harmony for the big fish for it is they that set the pitch. They are the masters of the river, it is to their advantage to combine to defend themselves against those who threaten their larder. The gigantic shadow of the Red Kremlin spreading over the plain of Europe was to them a Bogey-Man, skilfully exploited by the masters of the *Pan-European* game, the fine young aristocrat with the cold glance of the *samurai*, and the unfrocked socialist, the cunning old mystic of the Quai d'Orsay. They hastened to assemble under their crook, in the same park, the flocks of conquerors and conquered, to guard their wool from the common rival the Union of proletarian States, seated in the saddle, one leg over Europe and the other over Asia, like a new Golden Horde, which threatened to bestride the world. Perhaps if the world—that world whose back was already bent beneath the weight of a privileged class—would have asked nothing better than a change of rider, or even to leap to the saddle behind the Golden Horde, if it had known that the horde was coming to help it to recover its own land. But that was just what it must not know. It did not know. That was managed. The millions

---

## THE COMBAT

---

of fleece-bearers, well coached by a "*Friends of the People*" Press, gathered terrified, around their shearers and opposed those who were trying to deliver them. Fear and foolishness can change sheep's hearts into lion-hearts, when the two notes are skilfully played upon. The engineers of *Pan-Europa* had no trouble in draining the scattered stagnant waters of empty idealisms, and they were working to gather them together for a Crusade of God and Dividends against the expropriatory Materialism of Moscow. Princes of the Church, and Barons of the Forges, pastors, rabbis and swastikas, Christ, Krupp and Creusot, seemed to be in agreement. Hermit Bernards were not lacking. One of Marc's old friends, plump Adolphe Chevalier,<sup>1</sup> in the suite of Briand, at the League of Nations, had become one of the canopy-bearers of *Pan-Europa*. Of course, he was also an apostle of National Defence, of a Nation armed from the cradle to the grave, males and females, the whole herd incorporated. The right-minded Press indefatigably reproduced his luxuriant locks, like a pianist's, and his popular countenance, like that of an old lady trying to look like Robespierre.

The prosperous face of Véron was seen less, or rather not at all. One might sooner have seen his quick, stubby hands. They wasted no time, they came and went, they went straight, but zigzagging between France and Germany, gripping business realities here and there, every time. At the moment, he was engaged in the cabals of the Franco-Germanic International Industrial with Hugenberg's Steel Helmets. It was Jean Casimir who informed Marc, for how could the poor devil, in his hole, ever have heard of it? His ideas of the antagonism of the forces of peace and the forces of war were still of the simplest. Jean Casimir enlightened him, on one of his flying visits to Paris. He had retained his strange intermittent fidelity to Marc, like a little prostitute who returns once a year to her first lover, out of superstitious devotion and

<sup>1</sup> See *The Death of a World*

an impulse of tender remembrance, seasoned with mockery. There was also a curiosity in his present return, which he took care to conceal. He was, of course, aware of Marc's conjugal misfortune, he had been one of the first to foresee and look out for it, and he was not sorry to note the traces of it on his companion's face, it was one more spectacle. Marc knew his Sainte-Luce well enough to drop the curtain before the play, and showed an impassive countenance. But he gained nothing by it. Sainte-Luce knew how to peep through the holes in the curtain, and said to himself "The Marcassin is hit!" The excited interest shown by Marc in political matters seemed to him (as indeed it was) a distraction from torments whose depths, however, he did not suspect, for beyond the woman Marc was burning with the fire of an unsatisfied soul, struggling to solve the enigma of its destiny. If he had chosen, Jean Casimir could have given Marc news of his absent wife, for he had had some quite recently through the Stockholm Embassy, whose agents had enriched Assia's secret dossier with burlesque notes. With the malicious roguery of a teasing girl, not cruel, but revenging herself for what is hidden from her, he made a passing allusion to the pleasure a friend had had recently of meeting "Mme Marc Riviere on her travels." Marc never flinched, he waited. Jean Casimir watched Marc's nails scratching the cover of a copy-book, he waited too, smiled—and went back to politics. It took Marc some time to recover himself, his ears buzzed, he would have liked to bring Jean Casimir back upon the other scent. But it was too late, and he plunged once more into conversation upon those matters of money, trickery and power—those politics which he hated.

Jean Casimir was for the moment—not for long—attaché of the Embassy in Berlin. He had reason to be well informed of the Franco-Germanic political or financial cabals. He played his part in them. Like a good little fox which has sniffed in what direction the scent lies, the master-scent (what stuffed up nose can possibly have said that money has none?) of

---

## THE COMBAT

---

the two powers the State and Money, he had chosen the more real. He served the great barons of industry, under the livery of the Embassy. Even his ambassador knew nothing of his manœuvres. He had two simultaneous French policies, not exactly opposed but superposed, one for show, one below ground. Jean Casimir performed his evolutions from the surface to the bed of the river, swimming under water like a little fish. What guided him, as usual, was not his own interest (though he was quick enough at snapping up, but he had such a small appetite! A nibble at the fly's head was enough for him), it was the game. He would have been a king of gamblers but for one fault, which was not a small one,—it amused him less to play his own cards well than to peep at his adversary's hands,—and, another worse fault, the tip of his tongue was a little too long. He was too fond of sharing a laugh with a lone companion, either in bed, or *tête-à-tête* with the first casually-met person whose physiognomy appealed to him. Yet he knew, better than anyone, how much is paid for ears. He had once been, for a time, controller of those of a whole battalion of *belles-de-nuit*. But he had too much wit to expend. He depended on his wits to repair the damage his wit did to the game. And after all, the game was only his game for the amusement of the player, not for the stakes. For who won or lost, in the end, he did not care a pin! There were even certain days when he would not have been sorry to make those lose for whom he was supposed to win. "Heads or tails! As I feel disposed!" The fact is that, like many of his masters, the *condottieri* of imperialist finance, he was of mixed breed, with the mentality of a freedman of the Roman Empire. His roots did not hold to the soil.

When Marc began to play on the violin of European peace, Jean Casimir's girlish tongue began to dance. He was amused at the disorderly intrusion of this grasshopper into the wasps' nest. This poor chap who imagined that he was working for the peace of the world!

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"Peace, old chap, is no longer made by the Press, nor by speeches, nor in the Forum, nor in Parliament, nor in the interviews of ministers, nor the Conferences of diplomatists, not even at the front of armies That belongs to the past It is out of date ! Peace and war are in the hands of those who hold the purse-strings a dozen "Your money or your life !" They do not even offer you the choice They will make it for you Your life or death is in our hands, my dear boy When we choose !"

It was more than enough to make Marc fly out Such fatuity ! even though he knew it was ironical

"When you choose ? When you like ? Who are you ? Who ? You 'the Flea' ? You can do nothing You want nothing "

The Sainte-Luce was not susceptible He wanted nothing at the moment, but to aggravate Marc He was pleased with his success

"The flea in your ear I'm going to put it there Just keep still ! "

He unwound his ball of confidential information Marc sulkily let him go on At the third phrase he had pricked up his ears At the tenth his coat bristled He yapped He punctuated these indiscreet revelations with furious and stupid (in the classic sense) growls He hung upon the lips of the indiscreet Mercury who was betraying his master's tricks Jean Casimir complaisantly unveiled politics for him—real politics—the politics of those who pull the strings of opinion and States the Royal Dutch, Standard Oil ("Do you like oil ? they have put some everywhere "), the Committees of the Forges or Collieries, Skoda, Creusot, etc He told him, with a wealth of detail (this arrant Scapin forgot nothing !) the dates, figures and places of the secret treaties, the conventions, which unknown to them, bound the States, with the complicity of their valets—valets of the Press, or the government He counted up on his finger-tips the great newspapers which had

sold themselves (when ? and for how much ?) to one or another of these ogres, and told of the control exercised by their agents over sales, in kiosks, bookshops and newspaper-stalls, of periodicals, pamphlets, and all printed thought As he went on Marc gradually sank in the pond Free thought was foundering Nothing was left of it but a few gurglings that made bubbles on the surface of the slimy water He struggled he protested, he contested But he felt himself that it was only for form's sake At each attempt at denial, Jean Casimir nailed him down with a fact, to which he could oppose nothing save repeated, "I won't have its ' ' like a child dressed, undressed, whipped, wiped and handled by grown-ups, who knows that grown-ups will do without his leave

Overwhelmed, he cried, at last

"Then, all we are doing, everything we can do, is useless ! There is nothing left but to blow our brains out If before, or at the same time, we could blow them up too ! "

Jean Casimir, satisfied with the effect he had produced, graciously held out a pole to the drowning man

"Who knows ? Who knows ? Perhaps it will come sooner than we expect We must not despair of the imbecility of the strongest Naturally, if it depended on you and your party, the platonic lovers of beautiful Europa, beautiful Europa would be in the lake or in the Euaine the bull is carrying her off But, thanks be to God, there is the bull, the idiot ! (Did you ever see a bull fight ?) And (the mercies of God are infinite), instead of one bull, there are two, three, half a dozen there is the white bull, the black bull and the red bull, there is the Union Jack, the Swastika, the Star-spangled Banner and there is (salute !) the Blue-White-Red of the tricolor swan of Saint Point, M Alphonse de Lamartine, which floats over the cellar of milliards of our Bank (I say 'ours', you see !) and over the Empire of our Republic, where the sun never sets All these bulls fight and bang up against each other, heads down Are there not two great buffaloes in our enclosure,



---

## THE COMBAT

---

fighting with their horns financier capital and industrial capital! Each supported by other beasts outside the ring London or New York And all want to take all there is to take, but each one wants to do it by his own means, and for his own privileged profit The policies of the thieves, stocks and shares, fall foul of each other on the Bourse, and green baize of the States—even, when possible, on the red tables of battle-fields So, the game remains a draw, and the people who are the stake have the benefit of an hour or two's respite Take advantage of it! Browse in the fields meanwhile, with last year's calves "

"I'm not hungry," said Marc, with a gloomy air "How absurd to fatten oneself to-day, so as to be eaten to-morrow "

"Who knows? Who knows? It may last our time "

"To last without action is not living "

"There's always room at the roulette table I put down my stake, I play, therefore I live "

"And what can you stake? If finance has taken everything, what room is there for politics? "

"It is the subtlest game Politics hold the balance It hesitates, wavers and stakes on both sides, it watches and waits to see which will be the stronger The game consists in being and willing with the stronger, one minute before it becomes so So one appears to walk before it, and it follows that the block-head itself is taken in For instance, if the scale of high finance is the heavier, we play for Franco-Germanic reconciliation, if the scale of industry, we denounce German armaments, and arm ourselves We drive disarmament and armament at once, with equal strength, both horses are always ready in our stables Maginot and Briand—war, peace Our horses rear and bite each other, but that is chiefly for the gallery They are old, well-trained cockaded horses, all very proud of belonging to the France stable They wait each their turn And whatever number is drawn we lose nothing "

## THE COMBAT

"Because you have nothing left to lose Whatever game you play, you are playing the game of others"

"In this world below, what counts, old chap, is not what one is, but what one appears to be"

"For you, the shadows! Not for those masters of high finance, whose mask you have just lifted for me They, at least (I understand them!) would rather be than seem"

"And so everybody is satisfied"

"I'm not I would like to see the lot of you, on both sides, go bust together"

"It will come I've told you so Don't get impatient"

"If you are so detached from what is to come, why don't you do all you can to make it come?"

"I have only to do what I am doing The old ship makes a show, but she's leaking, and we gnaw the keel!"

"Then, wouldn't it be better to pass to the other ship, that of the Reds, and clear the sea of the wreckage?"

"The International of Moscow?" said Jean Casimir, drawing back "No, no, my boy! I am not tempted That's not for me The game they play is too serious There's no pleasure in it! And I don't like promiscuity"

"Yes, you would rather sit among the croupiers!"

"I can't help it I prefer well-bred robbers I gnaw the old ship with them We love her, you see!"

"In that case, love her well! Gnaw and gnaw away! And go to the bottom with her!"

He had need, that night—he was choking—to go and beg his mother's breath He had not been near her for weeks He did not want her to see his defeat, he had said to himself "To save myself unaided—to show *them*" (Whom? Annette? Or that other, far from Paris, who corresponded with Annette?) He wanted to show her whom he had banished from his thoughts (but his thoughts cheated him) that he could do without her, that he carried on his life, his faith and his action, without her This secret defiance, which

kept him taut, had saved him from destruction To let himself be destroyed would put Assia in the right But that night he could bear it no longer, he needed to rest his head on a woman's breast and share with a woman's hands the too heavy weight of his rancours and fury He unburdened himself of all that he had just heard Annette showed no surprise Her friendship with Timon had taught her She knew that politics is a puppet show of which the mouthpieces of the White House, the Quai d'Orsay, Wilhelmstrasse or Chequers, are the puppets in the hands of the great Capital, and the strings are entangled, for the great Capital is a giant with several heads, which are rivals, but whatever head or hands may hold the string, the master of politics is Money What did the master want to-day? She was interested in Marc's fresh information, but she received it with a coolness that disconcerted Marc, and revolted him She perceived it, and reminded him, with a smile, that it was nothing new to her! Throughout the War, while the nations were tearing at each other, had not the Money of the Franco-German Forges, which fattened on the carnage, imposed on both States, and the Chief Headquarters of both armies, the obligation of religiously respecting their hen that laid the golden eggs, the Briey basin? And the contract had been loyally respected on both sides, when all other treaties of sovereigns, ministers and States, and the laws of man and God, were no more than scraps of paper If the world's opinion, though warned, had feigned deafness to accept it, what more would it not accept? They could do as they pleased now! Annette expressed ironical surprise that the holders of almighty power should show such moderation! Marc did not like irony, except when he dealt in it himself He said

"Stop! If you knew all that I did not know till to-day, how can you accept it?"

"I do not accept," said Annette "That is the reason of my existence"

"What do you mean?"

"I accept nothing, my dear boy What is, is And I am "

"What are you? What am I? It is not enough not to accept What do we want? Where can we turn? Towards those who stake on peace, or those who stake on war? It is the same thing on both sides On one side Europe (or that's saying too much—our West) gains perhaps from twenty to thirty years of armed peace But when one sees what is under it, what the rest of the world pays and will pay for it, can we, can I, associate myself with it? These peacemakers, peace is not their object It's money Money wants peace to-day, war to-morrow There is no peace "

Annette said

"There never is War is always hidden under the mask And that is their civilization Flowers cover the grave The worthy folk ask no more So long as they see the flowers and not the grave! Those who dig the grave are not their enemies, but those who force them to see it! And let them come to it as late as possible Let them still cherish the illusion that the gravedigger has forgotten them And so they live Peace, their peace, is the little wall round the cemetery, which they cannot see over, they do not want to see those who are being laid in the earth on the other side—the exploited, the oppressed who pay, as you say, for the good life or luxury of others "

"Then what can we do? "

"Carry on *our* peace, and *our* war They and we call nothing by the same name "

"I will climb over the cemetery wall "

"I have scratched the wall with my nails, and through the chink, I see daylight on the open fields "

"No, I see nothing, I don't want to see anything, if all the others do not see with me I will be blind with all, or share the light with all! "

Annette kissed his eyes

## XIV

It was at this time that I first met Marc. I was on a passing visit to Paris, staying at a little hotel near the Sorbonne. I had not been living in France for three or four years. Marc had seen my recent book on Gandhi, at his mother's. It engrossed him. A gleam of light was showing at the end of the path, in the darkness of the forest. He was wondering if that path might be his. He was hesitating at the cross-roads. He came to see me one morning in the little *salon* of the hotel, where people were coming and going every moment. He could not make up his mind to speak. I looked at this young wolf, lean and anxious, his nervous hands, and wild eyes, beautiful light eyes that seemed gloomy. I took him into my room, still undone, the bed open, and everything in disorder. There was no question of apologies. The fine gloomy eyes had lightened. The mistrust with which he was armed gave place, without transition, to naïve gratitude. And he began to speak at once.

It was not the first time that I had been consulted on the itinerary of life. I was a kind of travel agency, and I had directed more than one young man or woman either towards Asia or towards Moscow for the pupils of more than one reflected the light of one of the stars that are rising in the East. But I saw more than one star in the young wolf's eyes, their broken fires clashed, they went out, and shone forth again, heavy clouds passed and repassed before them. While he precipitately affirmed in feverish jerky outbursts, seeking guidance from my eyes, his agreement with the doctrine of heroic passivity and non-violence practised by Gandhi, I realized the violence of this nature, and of its contradictory passions, and that it was not attracted by the peace of love, but by its combats—and not by the repose in faith, but the fever of acting according to its truth. Now, he had not got

that truth, he was seeking it, quartered between its opposite ways, all his young body tense, and drawn by four horses— And I told him so for he was one of those young men (it was obvious, at the first glance) who cannot cheat themselves to create an illusion. And yet, they need an illusion, like everyone else. But when they have acquired one, it weighs upon them like remorse, they cannot digest it, they cannot breathe, till they have spewed it out. I told him so.

"Your truth is *your* nature. Do not betray, nor do violence to your nature by espousing that of another! You are not made for marriage" (I saw his mouth contract) "You have quite enough to do to espouse yourself! You have in you man and woman, the for and against, the yes and the no, the passion for and the aversion to violence, the exigencies of an irreducible ego, and the need for sacrifice. Reject nothing! Keep everything! Suffer, seek the finest harmony, that which is the black honey of discords!

"ἐκ τῶν διαφερόντων καλλίστην ἁρμονίαν "

"It is easy for you to say so! What if the harmony is impossible? If it is so to me? "

"With a brave and sincere nature, such as yours——"

"What do you know of it? What do I know of it myself? "

"I know it for you. With you, if such a duel of the soul is possible, if it lasts between the forces, between the interior gods, who wrap themselves in cloud and lightning, it is because it is a necessary hour in the great combat, in the Iliad which humanity is writing and fighting. And the more painful the blows given and received, the more the heroic necessity of the combat is proved."

"But if I die in it? "

"Die, my boy! *Stirb und werde!* (Forgive me for saying *tu!*) "

"No, I beg you! I thank you for it. "

With an impulsive gesture, he put his hand on my knee, and

squeezed it with his firm and tender fingers, then withdrew it, as if ashamed

"I am quite willing to die I am not afraid I ask nothing more! But I would not like to die uselessly Not for myself! Not for myself alone! Not to save myself, like those selfish cowards of religion and thought!"

And I conceived a great love for him I took his hand "Do not fear! The hour will come You will sacrifice yourself for mankind There is no lack of opportunity in our days Be patient! It will come Wait! Be ready!"

He had risen, and I rose He wished to speak, but he could not But his hand, in my hand, spoke for him He gave me a look, like a shy young girl giving thanks And he went away

I never saw him again, but once, at a distance, without his knowledge (I will relate it) But I heard afterwards that he was grateful to me for not sparing him, for having treated him as a man sacrificed beforehand, who should feel it a proud joy to be so

## XV

For the moment care had the upper hand, the gold of his honey was dark A tragic vision cast a shadow It is difficult at twenty-five to renounce victory (in the sense of the world, which one despises in vain all the more that one's feet burn to crush it!) But Marc's heart beat faster One was not Annette's son without conceiving of another victory—that of Socrates and the Man on the Cross, that of John Huss and of Giordano Bruno, that of those who make the joy of others with their blood—"Durch Leiden Freude"—from the lance-thrust the fountain, at which the panting harts drink

"*Sicut cervi*" He was proud and sad (poor little man!) that my eyes had selected him Was it then written on his forehead? However it might be, thanks be to those who spoke to him according to the law, the sole law of truth! For

---

## THE COMBAT

---

he understood now, better than ever, that that law was his it was his mission to be true ! To suffer, to err, to contradict himself, even to fall and soil himself, but to be true ! One will get up again One washes A true soul cannot be damned The worm of death cannot gnaw the incorruptible truth And Marc's heart swelled at the thought that this very law of truth with which his nature was stamped, was also, though he had not known it, the core of the soul of that Gandhi towards whom a blind instinct of defence had urged him—though he was not to follow the same path (I had revealed to him the *Credo* of the frail unbreakable little man who led three hundred million men "*Truth is God*")

Therefore, he was to deny nothing of the profound forces of his nature, even if there was enmity between them, even if, mutually gnawing each other, they gnawed his vitals The independence of the individual, and sacrifice for the community Marx and Gandhi The *Still Voice* of the eternal soul, daughter of God, and the grandiose *Ananke* of historic materialism, with the anvil and the hammer, that forges and reforges society Will it ever forge the two metals together into a beautiful and durable alloy ? Or will it be crushed between the anvil and the hammer ? Who dies, will see Meanwhile, forge ! With your flesh, with your pain ! And burn yourself, if needs be, but never let the fire die out !

Annette was struck by the fire that burned, those evenings, in her boy's eyes But he did not tell her of the visit That exaltation lasted for a few days, and then died down in the wear and tear of every day's jolts But some embers remained in the depths of the soul which were never quenched again

Resolved to fight his battle, alone and for all, without compromise, Marc found himself gradually cold-shouldered by all parties, which deemed him unassimilable They did not brutally reject him, it was not their way, the equivocal way of the times, they simply dropped him The articles he sent to their papers were not refused, but put aside He bled



himself to publish a little pamphlet, in which he denounced the collusion, of which he had been made aware, between the nationalist industrials of France and Germany, under the complaisant wing of their governments. But the pamphlet was mechanically kept out of all the kiosks and bookshops. Better still, it disappeared as soon as it left the printers. Nearly all the stock was engulfed, as if the public had absorbed it. Six months later the remainders reappeared, vomited up, yellow, rancid, dirty, unsold. Not a copy had been read. At the back of what shop, in what *in-pacc* of the Offices that watch over the public safety, had Marc's thoughts lain in pickle? The one thing certain was that Marc found himself with his dish clouts on his hands, and a nice bill to pay for storage. He set his teeth, tightened his belt, swallowed his rage, and retired under his tent. The hour had not come. The hour would come when his thought would be written in his blood. Then they would be obliged to read it! Meanwhile he had to clarify that troubled, overburdened mind, and first he had to feed the stomach by which it lived. The Indian<sup>1</sup> has said "*No God for empty stomachs*!"

He had luckily found work with an old master craftsman, an individualist and libertarian of the old style, who made art bindings. These old trades are dying out for lack of customers, with the old fine taste of the West. The profit was scarcely enough for one person to rub along on. Elisee Rateau could have done without a companion if he had not taken a fancy to the young out-of-work intellectual, whose thin *trecentiste* hands were skilful at the fine craft, and whose honest, hurt, individualist's pride screened him from the Machine in the street, the new world. He never suspected that the new world had come into his house with the young man's tormented mind. But Marc clenched his teeth on his thoughts and kept silent, letting the old man talk on without listening to him. And working side by side they soliloquized,

<sup>1</sup> Ramakrishna

one with his mouth open, and the other with his mouth shut. The precise movement of busy fingers did not prevent care from sapping the heart.

Assia, expelled, driven away, denied, returned to the warm house of that body which the ardent essence of her kisses had never left. She burned in all his limbs, dumb, heavy and swollen, like an inflammation. He could not have evoked her features, he felt her diffused in his head, in his stomach, in the quivering of his hands, in the dryness of his tongue. And sometimes he started at a tone of voice or a touch that left him gasping, helpless and upset, like a defective compass. He had to strain his energy to tighten up his relaxed reason. But then his reason, to master the object, had to tear it out of itself, take it by the shoulder, stare it out of countenance, and say "Stay there! You can't come in!" Then one had time to look the other up and down! But Marc's glance fell, pierced through by an electric shock, and did not dare to rise beyond the chin for he felt himself scrutinized by those eyes, and he did not want to appear to avoid them, and out of bravado, his eyes devoured the hostile body, and he trembled that he was powerless to bend it under him. Yet it was no longer the wounded pride of the first days, jealousy seeking revenge. The worst of the crisis was exhausted. With his forehead, mouth, and eyes glued to that headless torso (he would not look at the head) he began to imbue himself again with the wild odour of that body, to dissolve himself in it as in those nights when they were made one, to lose himself in order to find in the depths of that well, the self of the other and her thoughts. And now the flesh of his fingers touched the reasons—the true reasons—of Assia's treason. "*True*" and "*treason*" these two words clashed like an angry contradiction but he could not separate them, he was caught and clawed by their nails. He breathed in, with the odour of Assia's thighs, the deadly void of that individualism, without windows or doors on to the great life of

men and action, in which he had tried to immure her with himself. More honest than he, and madder, crueller and more brutal, swayed by instinct Assia had beaten down the walls. She had walked over his body. The vital instinct had not deceived her. She was closer to nature. She had been true. She had fled, fled from death—as a crowd in a burning building, seized by panic makes a savage rush for the exit, careless of her companion.

‘She did right!’

Marc confessed it, against his will, and he heard his own lips, where his tongue licked the taste of Assia’s saliva, open against his will to say

“Save yourself, darling! And God be thanked that you did save yourself! As to me, I who did not know how to save you, let me save myself if I can! If I cannot, let me die! Do not turn back to look at me! It is for me alone to save myself. And you have shown me the way.”

## XVI

But this forced confession was covered, an instant later, by storms of ulcerated pride, which reared itself neighing “Betrayed! You have betrayed me!” and refused to forgive. And in that typhoon of opposing passions, and in that void, that falling to ruin of the ideas which his mind had assembled, built together, and fashioned, so that they gave him some sort of shelter, he was naked, raw and flaming like a torch of desire. His starved young body, which he forced to famine, rebelled against him. Asceticism is a dangerous discipline after a thousand and one nights of ardent and stormy embraces. Desire is like cocaine: only with pain and prudence can the poison be got rid of. To break off is to risk breaking oneself: the body grows delirious, and the will loses control of it. Marc was charged with electricity, like a

day of dry burning mist, a fever without sweat, beneath one of those white summer skies that weigh over Paris. The cracked burning earth calls out for rain, and gapes and steams under the downpour. The downpour was waiting for Marc, suspended.

The secret had been guarded in vain, the rupture between the young couple was known. One of the first to detect it, even before the news got about, was Bernadette Verdier, *née* Passereau (for she had exchanged one bird's name for another), Marc's fiancée that might have been.<sup>1</sup>

When Marc got married, she had shut the shutters on her disappointment. No one had seen anything of it, not even Sylvie, who knew of it and expected her to grieve. She showed an admirable indifference, and Sylvie was almost angry at it. She wanted the other to suffer, to bewail herself, so as to have a companion in her resentment. But Bernadette left her to fume alone, and Sylvie's position was ridiculous. She could scarcely play the part of disdained fiancée on her own account.<sup>1</sup> She bore Bernadette almost as great a grudge as she did Assia. She called her

"Noodle!"

But Bernadette was not disturbed. Not for an instant did she desist from her cold smile. She was not playing to the gallery. She could not have said exactly why she was like this, nor if it was an attitude of defence. She did not try to discover what was going on within her. Yes, there were moments when she felt an atrocious pain at her heart, and the rest of the time a deadly boredom under which lay hidden, in the rock at the bottom of the hole, little hard triangular heads, a knot of thoughts, long coiled-up shapes, with ferocious eyes. It was better not to move the stones! One lives, one lives. It was a case of living on the only plane a Bernadette thinks admissible: reasonable and practical life.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Death of a World*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

There is no sense in brooding for ever over regrets And as to rancours, one cannot build on rancours, but one builds, and one folds the rancours away in camphor, in the clothes-chest they can wait Bernadette had gone calmly on her way and since she must have a husband, she had taken one Taken him according to the standard of her practical reason, which included the three satisfactions of ambition, of bourgeois comfort, and of the bed

André Verdier whom she chose, was an industrialist of thirty-five, partner in an old well-known firm (they are soon old in Paris) of motor-car manufacturers He had known how to make his pile in ten years, waiting for the time to start a firm of his own whose first care would be to knock the bottom out of the old firm that had trained and maintained him He was a handsome man, with pale-blue eyes and regular features, smiling, amiable, and affable—prodigiously indifferent He was a great favourite with women How did Bernadette come to please him? He had only to throw the handkerchief for the loveliest and richest to pick it up It was Bernadette's revenge for her wounded pride of body She must conquer this man, since another man had disdained her She was anything but beautiful—thin and swarthy—but she was tall and supple, she knew how to make the most of her shortcomings, according to the taste of the day

“ *the elegant thinness  
Of the shoulder with its sharp contour,  
The slightly pointed hip, and the swaying waist  
Like an angry reptile* ”

Verdier, who was a connoisseur in women, read on this woman's mouth, thin-lipped and tense under the lipstick, the promise of nights without boredom, and, in the cold and precise steel-grey eyes, the pledge of days as active as the nights but labouring in a different field It did not take

the two of them very long to come to an understanding upon a fruitful and well-regulated improvement of life. And the substantial *dot* that Sylvie had assured to her ward was the final compensation for her plainness. The thing was settled before Sylvie got wind of it. She gave her consent sulkily. Her own marriage in bygone days had been nothing to boast about, it was not very brilliant. But at least her Leopold was of the stout stuff that lasts and gives security. She saw through the fundamental defects of Bernadette's chooser (or her chosen). Bernadette saw them as well as she did, under the shirt-front of the insolent parvenu with his silky eyes, moral (often physical) cowardice, and unctuous lying, which is a form and an effect of cowardice—the arrant weakness of character which evades and flies from truth, and whose sole art is to disguise it to itself, a man who has never dared to look at his naked soul in the glass, but who knows very well how to see that of others, their vices, weaknesses, and blemishes, so as to exploit them—never their sorrows, for those do not interest him, and if they did they might hamper him, he does not like to do evil for evil's sake, but for his own good and yet, on occasion, when he feels himself protected by impunity—whether in *tête-à-tête* with another (of course, if the other is the weaker!) or, in a great crisis, war or panic, when he depends on the elementary brutality of collective opinion, he may very well become ferocious. After all, it is a type of "honest man" sufficiently common nowadays, middle-class *bourgeois*. We have forgotten how to grow indignant, so long as he keeps his accounts correctly, and his legal honesty is exercised at the expense of others than ourselves and our incomes. Bernadette felt no anxiety. In *tête-à-tête* she would not be the weaker of the two. And in public she knew as well as he did how to keep in step with public opinion. It is the strongest and when one leans upon the strongest one is the strongest. Verdier's very defects were her guarantee. She would hold him more securely than a Marc, whom she

---

## THE COMBAT

---

would have been foolish enough to respect—not out of esteem, but out of love

And the marriage turned out well Verdier, duly bridled, walked circumspectly She did the same Never a hole in the contract Both were too busy bringing business profits to a round figure And Bernadette's thin figure also found time to grow round, twice While one is planting fortune, one must also plant the heir The heir came First, the male, then the daughter one must think of the future, the day will come to get oneself a son-in-law And Bernadette was a good mother, as she was a good wife, without any great love—which does not mean without attachment One values what one has, especially what one has taken and fashioned—because it is "my" property one takes care of it

But in the opaque darkness of her subconscious mind, which she discovered again in her bed, when she undressed the soul under her skin during her long hours of insomnia, her old desire came out of its hole, silent, wounded, on the watch Without anyone being aware of it, out of the corner of her eye, with a glance sharpened by rancour, she spied upon Marc's home She saw the cracks before anyone else And when the rupture took place, she knew it (by what eavesdropping means?) from the very first days—before Annette

She only made one mistake (and whether the mistake was not deliberate will never be known)—she mentioned it to her sister Colombe She told her, without emotion, as a fact, the disarray into which Marc had been thrown by his wife's betrayal, and the moral solitude in which he was living The tender-hearted Colombe was moved by it The coldness, not without a spice of irony, with which Bernadette spoke of it, contributed to, rather than detracted from Colombe's emotion, for it made her feel sorry for Marc She had a childhood's attraction to him She had known him, as a little girl, through Bernadette's conversations with Sylvie, who sang the praises of her colt, even when chaffing, for she wanted to

put him in the elder sister's field. And Colombe looked at him over the fence of the field, with wide eyes, in which were written admiration mixed with innocent envy, she bowed down, sighing, before the happy destiny of her elder, and when that destiny was shattered, she sighed over it more than the elder. She had a tender soul, romantic and wounded—eternally—for at the least contact her beautiful skin was scratched by the claw of life. But that beautiful skin had never tempted Marc, though he was greedy, the bad luck had been that Marc, vexed at the marriage bait which Sylvie held out to him, visited his irritation upon the whole family, and the interested pursuit of the steel-grey eyes annoyed him neither more nor less than Colombe's great brown ecstatic eyes which innocently drank him in. Yet those eyes were beautiful, more beautiful than Assia's, and beautiful were those arms, that neck, those cheeks and that mouth, pure, sad, rather silly, and tempting. But love bloweth where it listeth. It had not filled Colombe's sails. All her life it was to blow askew for her. But then why did she not know how to manœuvre? She waited, she hoped, she let things slide. Poor Colombe! It was never her pigeon that found the way to the dovecot.

Sylvie had disposed of her destiny, as she had (but unsuccessfully) of Bernadette's. Her prettiness, the native grace of her movements, to which a naïve bashfulness of heart gave an extra charm, designated her, in the eyes of the expert queen dowager of Parisian games and pleasures, for "*saltare et piacere*." She made her enter the school of ballet dancing. The little flower conscientiously stretched the fine flexible stalks of her legs. She worked as well as she could, not without success, but without pleasure. She would rather have twined them round the beloved (Which? No matter which, but he who was to be the beloved of her whole life!) But to offer them to a crowd of anonymous lovers hurt her and made her ashamed. She had nothing, absolutely nothing



---

## THE COMBAT

---

to fit her for the theatre, not even that very innocent spot of natural mummery that sleeps or dances in nearly every pretty girl in Paris. She would have liked to spend her life by her own fireside, or in her bed, her bed for two who make one. Sylvie might pride herself on having a famous nose when she tried her hand at psychology! But she was determined not to be wrong. If nature rebelled, so much the worse for nature! The gentle Colombe did not rebel, she sighed, but she resigned herself. And after the school, she docilely allowed herself to be engaged in the *corps de ballet* of a large theatre, half music-hall, half opera, which was being started. Her docility did not prevent her from remaining a star of second magnitude, but with her charms it would have been child's play for a shrewder girl to become, as Forain says, a comet of Grand Opera. Only a protector was lacking. Protectors were not lacking. The poor girl never knew how to accept them opportunely, nor how to refuse them when inopportune. She wanted to follow the dictates of her heart. Her heart wept, and said "no" to all "serious" protectors—then pursued and worn out, said "yes", by way of escaping, to protectors who were not serious. Afterwards she would come sobbing to Sylvie (she dared not come any more now), who said

"Great goose! Whoever landed me with such a nunny?"

Or to Bernadette, who put on a bored look

"I have no time"

And who thought

"Do it or don't do it! But don't tell! . . . Do I go telling?"

She had no one to pour herself out to but her brother Ange, the seminarist. The good boy heard some confessions! But that was, or would be, his calling. One must get used to it! He was doing so. Besides, he had been used to receiving her confidences from childhood. And in their candour and trust there were some of every hue. However shocked by the

---

## THE COMBAT

---

confidences of to-day, he listened calmly, with patience and pity, for he knew his Colombe too well, not to recognize the same candour in all her errors and shame, and if it had lain with him to give absolution, he would have poured it freely on her soiled plumage, lacking the lustral water, he poured out his tenderness, and the balm of his homilies, with which the little dancer mingled her cooing interspersed with sobs

But the confessor was not always available. He was making a retreat. Then, after being ordained, he was appointed to a cure in the provinces. And Colombe, who was no hand at writing, had to keep her misfortune to herself. It is not certain that the pious Ange did not find it a great relief. He continued to send her consolation by post, at long intervals. But no more than she did he possess the simple art of speaking in writing. In speaking and writing he was two different men. He who spoke to Colombe through the post was flowery and unctuous, a holy priest full of the word of God. Colombe read religiously, and then made the sign of the cross. But she felt cold. She waited, she needed the man's words to warm her. His arms also, and his embrace.

Marc's conjugal catastrophe, which Bernadette had confided to her, upset her, as if it had been her own. She spent more than one night turning it over on her hot pillow. She turned Marc over on it too, quite innocently. The romantic girl made herself a Marc in her own image, loving, unloved, betrayed, abandoned. She longed to warm him and thereby warm herself. Oh! humbly! To console him while consoling herself. Afterwards, who knows? But on those nights she read no further. Her thoughts refused to turn the page.

And one morning she found herself, God knows how! in Marc's path. Ravishing to behold, discreetly made up, her delicate face brightened by a moderate and exquisite pencil, artistically presented, she looked good enough to eat. And the young wolf was hungry. Neither of them meant any

---

## THE COMBAT

---

harm Nature had taken the matter in hand In truth, Colombe had no idea (so she thought) but to console him And that, in the ordinary way, was what the proud Marc would least have tolerated But by an uncalculated trick of instinct, she, usually so clumsy, ingenuously offered herself to Marc as to a brother in arms, wounded like herself, and stronger—seeking to be consoled Few words, sweet sad eyes, which did not stress, but settled like a hand laid lightly on an arm, careful not to lean hard one can only feel the warm fingers through the stuff How beautiful they were, those fingers, those eyes, Marc discovered for the first time ! (He was fasting ) They even seemed (it's incredible) intelligent to him And the best of it is that at that moment they really were intelligent Loving flesh, the blind beauty, works these miracles Unfortunately they do not last But if they last long enough to achieve the end, that is all she wants

Marc, without thinking of it, found himself with his hand on the pretty girl's arm, as they walked along the street together, affectionately confiding in each other She had asked no questions , without being questioned he told her, with sober truth, but without passion, as if speaking of another person, about his misfortune , and she said neither " Oh ! " nor " Ah ! " , she asked nothing more than what he chose to pour into her ear and her heart He had no need to stress matters She knew She understood At least, her eyes made him believe it Marc was not to be outdone , out of gratitude he displayed the same intelligent sympathy for the other's troubles They caught his attention for the first time for he had never bothered about them before He was pleased to detach himself a moment from his own, to bend fraternally over those of the little dancer To his first questions on the subject, she replied with such a look of distracted gratitude that Marc was nearly floored by it They sat down in the shadow of a statue in a square, surrounded by the noise of traffic She opened her Pandora's box for him But the

---

## THE COMBAT

---

same ingenuous art which had hitherto guided her held back misplaced confidences at the edge of the box, and let nothing filter through her fingers but sweet and touching confessions of a chaste and wounded passion. Though Marc was anything rather than a simpleton, and might have known what to think of the timidity of the Colombe of the *corps de ballet*, at that moment he was ready, had she asked him, to give her God without confession. It was the devil she would have asked for! The devil was tempted too. But Marc persisted in defending the integrity of his widowhood. Vainly did he look upon the faithless one as dead. Precisely! He made it a point of honour. Pride was the accomplice of love, denied and again denied, for the woman who had played him false also the hate and furious contempt which he felt bound to profess for all women, and which he would not renounce. Therefore he meant to keep the interest he permitted himself to confess in the lovely plaintive eyes of the little dancer, and the luscious fruit of her mouth, in the neutral zone of fraternal friendship. But neutral zones are dangerous ground in the warfare of to-day. Some fine morning one wakes up invaded.

The invader was discreet. She, the little silly, had learned from her heart to retreat in the flush of victory, so as to make herself desired. She took care not to tire the patience, too new to last, of the complaisant listener, she did not wait for him to take his leave, she left first. She made their meetings rare, and refused to grant him what he expected her to offer: an invitation to her home. She was afraid that his too sophisticated eyes would recognize the source of her kept luxury, and at the same time the sincere exaltation of a pure love would have made her suffer if she had received in that bed him from whom she hoped to receive the gift of her lost virginity that she might give it back to him, smelted anew. And so the affair dragged on for a long time, without their seeing each other except for a few moments, in the streets,

and yet the young wolf's hunger increased. But the sheep, who languished to be eaten, recovered all her silliness, to run, after every meeting, to her good sister Bernadette, who showed a warm interest in hearing the progress of the adventure, and gave her sure advice. Colombe never failed to tell her everything, so intoxicated with her recital that she never saw the hardening of the other's eyes. And the day came when, panting from coming up too fast (she could not wait for the lift), she cried out her happiness in advance (Bernadette's dry hand put a stopper on her mouth), she was to go to Marc that night, the proud boy had begged and prayed, and she had let the *Amen* be dragged from her. (She had held herself down not to cry out "At last! At last! I kiss your hands. Thank you! Thank you!")

Bernadette urged very seriously that she should not compromise her success by showing her weakness too plainly, she interested herself in the costume which the lover was to wear that night, she calmly discussed its details, and above all she advised Colombe not to arrive before the appointed hour, it was better to keep him waiting. Colombe left, her heart swelling with gratitude. Everything was beautiful, everything was good, heaven and earth, men and God. And most beautiful and best the beloved who awaited her that night. She laughed to herself in the street, and already, with closed eyes, she swooned, like Danae, in his embrace.

Marc had not "begged and prayed", he had let the suction of those beautiful ass's eyes, like those of the *Fornarina*, draw from him the invitation to come to him in his wretched room. By dint of seeing them written in that glance, he had ended by saying the words, which were hardly out of his mouth when she snapped them up, all hot. They were said. It was too late to take them back. But he was displeased with himself. He had sincerely meant to refuse this adventure, though he had foreseen it from the first day. He would have liked to

---

## THE COMBAT

---

keep the advantage over Assia of fidelity, even without reason, to have more reasons for despising her. And he was not unaware of the dangers of pledges given to the romantic sensual avidity of the beautiful she-ass of Trastevere. Let him beware to whom she attaches herself! She binds him. He was resolved not to let himself be bound, and even that night, as he waited for her, he duped himself by assuring himself that he would not go beyond a blameless conversation. In defending himself, he felt bound to defend her for being her elder, and having known her as a child, he felt that he had a certain duty towards her. He even repeated to himself (what cheek!) the lesson he proposed to read her. But he lost the thread as he said it over, he was absent-minded. He counted the quarters on the church clock close by, and he could not sit still. He began again, for the tenth time, the phrase of prudish welcome which he was preparing, but never succeeded in finishing. He heard hasty steps, eager steps, on the stairs. The end of the phrase was forgotten. The beginning likewise. His hand found its way to the handle, and the door was open before it was knocked at. Before they saw each other they heard their breath, on both sides, panting like that of runners.

The Marathon runner came in. He had just time to catch a glimpse of the bust leaning forward, with the head enveloped in a mantilla. A quick hand had turned off the electric switch near the door. With the door shut, they were clasped together in the dark, like two halves of a box, and the eager mouth plunged. He was caught and he caught her. He lost knowledge of what followed. They came to themselves rolling pell-mell in the bed, he was panting under the blows of the hawk's beak. What a dove! She was not satisfied. They rolled once more, in the dark. But as the fever abated, his eyes began to see in the darkness, and he saw above him the beak and round eyes of the bird of prey, and he did not recognize his bird. Freeing himself and feeling her, he felt the

## THE COMBAT

hard thighs and thin arms His be<sup>ar</sup>th stopped He made an effort to sit up, and he called out

"Colombe!"

But the thin arms held him fast, and against his mouth the open mouth widening laughed and laughed, and one long arm was stretched upwards and turned on the electric switch above their heads In the hard light that blinded him, he saw over him, her bust raised, but imprisoning him between her legs, the thieving magpie, swarthy skinny Bernadette, triumphant "Nigra sum, sed pulchra" And so she was, in all the glow of her voluptuousness, her cunning and her victory He stared at her in amazement, and foolishly repeated

"Colombe"

She laughed shrilly and said

"Fulfil the week of Leah, and we will give thee the other also for the service which thou shalt serve with us yet seven other years"<sup>1</sup>

Her laugh, her eyes, her sharp teeth, her wide mouth working with excitement, cunning and pleasure, and above all that reek of earth opening to the sun, the happy body glowing for the first time under the mouth it had coveted, longed for and conquered, turned the head of the vanquished The protest he was vainly trying to formulate, with a tongue paralyzed like his conscience, died before it was born He laughed nervously too, and seizing Leah round the thighs he served her for another year

At that moment, sweating and in a fever, he heard "the other" stopping on the landing and knocking And he was struck as by a thunderbolt! The lightning flash roused and pierced him, he tore away the living ivy, he sat up, his brain in a whirl, prostrated "The other" was waiting outside the door, she was listening, through the crack she could

<sup>1</sup> The French differs slightly from both Revised and Douai versions  
(Translators Note)

---

## THE COMBAT

---

see the light which they had forgotten to switch off. He looked like a little boy caught doing wrong, and trying to deny it, he stretched his arm awkwardly over Bernadette's body as her sharp eyes scrutinized him, to put out the light, and missed it in his flurry. Meanwhile Colombe, impatient on the threshold began to tap at the door again. And under his half-raised body he saw the *gazza-ladra*, whose wide mouth was preparing for one of the shrill laughs he knew. He made horrified eyes at her to impose silence. Too late! The shrill laugh rang out sharp as a gunlet, it unwound itself and echoed right round the room, and under the door, and sent its stilettoes through the keyhole. Violently Marc applied his palm, brutal as a slap, over her mouth. Too late! He heard a moan outside the door. Then silence! He sat paralyzed, unable even to think, unconscious of Bernadette's teeth biting into his palm. And the other stood still also, on the threshold, leaning against the wall, as if inhibited by grief.

And suddenly a heartrending cry. They heard her headlong flight downstairs. Marc sprang out of bed, repulsed the woman who clung to him with a blow of his fist in the chest, and ran out on the stairs. Leaning over, he called

"Colombe!"

He even ran down after her to the next landing. But the sobbing Colombe did not come back, and the street door closed on her inarticulate "Hou, hou, hou." He went upstairs again. Bernadette was standing naked stretching herself before the glass, curiously she touched with her finger the bruise his fist had made on her breast, and sitting down on the edge of the bed, she calmly dressed herself. Marc stood motionless, stupidly watching her, and it was "the other" he saw. But between "the other" and his eyes, this naked woman, thin and satiated, hung like a curtain, dark of skin, and tawny haired, she displayed her ugliness proud of success, and every detail of her body, the



hairy thighs, the bony feet, the spine like a starved cat's, and the supple, hard bust leaning forward, the huddled silhouette with the pointed knees drawn up to the Harlequin chin, as she put on her shoes and stockings, and her sharp sidelong smile—this whole image was graven deep upon his eyes, as by a knife. He did nothing, not a movement to help her. He was silent. She was silent. She finished dressing herself, she cast a last look at herself in the glass, and saw Marc's stony, gloomy face there, and she smiled, she turned round, put her hands on his shoulders, and plunged her steely-grey eyes into his eyes and searched them, and under the ruins of desire and confusion she found a lance-head—hatred. Then her victory was complete. She had had her revenge and her pleasure. As she withdrew she cast a last appraising look upon the battle-field, the bed, the room, and the face of the vanquished. All was as it should be. Since the laugh between the sheets, they had not broken the silence. When she was on the landing she remembered the mantilla which had fallen in the corner of the room when she came in. She went back. Marc bent down, picked it up and handed it to her. Thanking him with a jerk of her chin, she saw the troubled state in which she was leaving him, and becoming human after her own fashion, she said

"Don't worry yourself about it!"

And went away

## XVII

After a night of troubled sleep, Marc awoke, his body eased, his heart full of shame. The moral discomfort was less in harmony with physical well-being than it would have been with illness. He was gnawed by anxiety. He had no time to attend to it, he had slept late, and he was obliged to rush off to his work, he read no newspaper. But the underlying anxiety floated below the surface all day.

## THE COMBAT

Late in the evening, on the way home, he heard two girls talking in the train about a dancer who had thrown herself into the river. He bought a paper at the first kiosk, and standing in the rain, on the gleaming pavement, under a street lamp, he read the bits of news which would supply the *petit bourgeois* of Paris with gossip for a few hours. What he read he had read and seen, during his troubled sleep that night. The distracted Colombe had fled straight to the Seine, and thrown herself in under the Pont Saint Michel. She had been fished out, half dead, and taken to the Hôtel-Dieu, her identity had not been established till the next day. Her condition was still too serious to admit of her being taken home. Her name shone brightly for a little while in the newspapers. her plunge accomplished what her pirouettes had not, and gave her an aureole of Bengal light. And tongues wagged busily upon the cause of her despair. Marc's tongue grew dry in his mouth. He was petrified with horror. He did not feel the rain drenching him. He wandered about the streets and quays and found himself at the Pont Saint Michel, he inspected the dark reflections under the arches and the lighted windows of the hospital. He went home feverish, and the following days dragged about with influenza to his work and to the hotel in the vicinity of the Etoile, where he went to inquire after Colombe. But they told him that she had not come home, and at the hospital that she had left. He did not know where to apply for news, for nothing on earth would have induced him to see Bernadette again, and she made no attempt to see him or, for that matter, to avoid him. She had got what she wanted. her success, and the appeasement of the secret desire which had tormented her for years. That appeasement forbade any remorse and satisfied her hunger for a long time. Nothing remained but to fold the downy wings of oblivion over the secret of her pleasure. She had returned to the routine of her domestic life, which half a night of cold, calculated delirium had scarcely interrupted. She was furious

at Colombe's reverberating plunge, it forced her to reconsider the trick by which she had cheated and won the game, and, above all, it caused the intrusion of opinion, sniffing after the truffle of "what will they say!" into the respectable Verdier-Passereau family. She did not even send for news of the rescued, for her "honour" was wounded by the scandal.

But returning from the workshop one night Marc found a *cure* walking up and down before his door, stared at by all the passing women of the district. It was Ange. They had a long and queer interview in Marc's room. The good priest told him that Colombe, convalescent from pneumonia, had retired to a provincial home of a semi-religious character, she refused ever to go back to her hotel or to the theatre. Ange, who had spent hours by her bedside, and had received her confidences from her own lips or, all hot and unveiled, spoken in fever through the medium of the nurse who looked after her, knew more than he said—and probably more than there was to know. Marc saw plainly that Colombe had made no mystery of her passion for him, but Ange imagined that he had responded to it, and that they had been lovers. Perhaps, by dint of desiring it, she thought so herself. In any case, she had let Ange believe it. The worthy *cure*, shaking his head, looked at Marc with an air of affectionate reproach, he looked as if he wished to say something he did not say, or as if he were waiting for Marc to say something that he did not say either. What did he want? He hesitated, and he coughed, then he spoke of another subject, Marc's own conjugal drama, for he was well informed, but the word "conjugal" was not pronounced, he was careful not to say "your wife", without sacrament the union to him was not valid, and the rupture, on the whole, brought Marc back to a regular way of life. He groped, he floundered. And suddenly Marc understood, the holy man, now that Marc was free, wanted him virtuously to marry his sister Colombe.

## THE COMBAT

Thus all sins, after repentance, would be forgiven *ad majorem gloriam Dei*, and in conformity with the interests of the family Ange, the *curé*, was sincere in his piety, and sincere also were the good brother who desired the welfare of his little sister and the knowing peasant of Paris who did not forget human laws and their bonds. It only remained for Marc to get angry, or pretend to be dense. He did the latter. He became afflicted with a deplorable deafness. The *cure* Ange coughed and raised his voice in vain, left alone on a compromising ground, he took a few steps, and stuck fast, he stopped, looked at Marc, understood, sighed, and bearing no malice, gave him his blessing, and took himself off.

Marc pitied Colombe, but he felt no remorse about her. His remorse concerned another. Was it remorse or vexation? Although there was little chance that the other would ever hear of it, he was mortified at having fallen into the same pitfall in which his pride and passion had given him the right to look down on Assia from above and despise her. And, into the bargain, that it had been to find a raven at the bottom of the pit instead of a dove, made him ashamed, doubly ashamed, like a fox caught by a skinny hen. His discomfiture, which made him sore against Bernadette, in the rebound made him examine himself seriously. He had to acknowledge that he had no right to condemn the weakness of others beyond remission, and that man or woman, there was nothing to reproach each other with, one was not worth much! The opportunity made the sinner more than the will. The pitiful will! Marc, so proud of his own, felt that it had not much weight when the great craving arose in the body. Not only that of love. All follies, all passions, in which the excess blood of the being rises to the neck of conscience and submerges it.

There was but one remedy to use those torrents as a great fire that feeds the blast furnaces, that desire, that passion, should be the spur that urges on the forces of Action!

"*Primum agere*"

"Action is wholesome and necessary

But where was action ?  
of it, far from him

Assia was right to go in quest

Had she found it ?

## XVIII

Assia was rushing about Europe, with her nose to the scent, but she had not caught the game

Millions of men, men and women—especially the under-thirties—were rushing about like herself. As soon as she had crossed the frontier she had come upon these feverish nations of youth, rushing and tearing, stumbling, butting into each other like rams—towards some action, no matter what, which eluded them—towards a vertiginous becoming. And in that post-War Germany there was a chaos of soul, drifting to furious despair. Everything they had believed in was destroyed. State, family, society, all the traditions of thought, every form of certitude, and even the idea of certitude. All belief in a stable and absolute point was spat out as an ignoble lie, and cowardice. And these young herds of Dante's damned, which the mad selfishness of the French victors had let loose like tornadoes between the walls of their dreary prison, bereft of hope, had one fury in common: hatred against the walls that suffocated them, against calmness, against order, against the stupid security of that prison of the past, which the France of those days, enriched, glutted, belching her victory, symbolized in the eyes of the world, France whose obese arteriosclerosis was bent on opposing itself to the chaos, disorder, and conflict, which are the necessary circulation of the world's blood. All the sufferings of defeat, all the rancours of ruin, were skilfully captured, disciplined and mobilized by the astute powers, rivals or enemies of France, by the cynical German capitalists, exploiters of German misery, and by the fishers in the troubled waters of social convulsions, against France the only scape-goat, the only living corpse, made solely responsible for the

dreadful agony of a world in revolt, which she was determined to bind to her decaying corpse. And the imbecile self-sufficiency of the Poincares, Poinlevés, Herriots, and Tardieus (all were equal in their obtuse self-satisfaction and certainty!), their murderous certainty that they had safe in their pockets, truth dead, and progress ossified, which had been won by their great-grandfathers of the Immortal Principles now laid in the earth (that cemetery!) brought water to the mill. "Miller, you are asleep!" The mill is grinding despair and hatred. New wars for the Right were being prepared, fed by a new ideology—Right to Life, Right to Movement, to Mutations, to Explosions of the compressed human mass in fermentation, Right to Chaos.

The Right to Chaos was a right of which Germany then gave herself good measure. At all times Chaos had been her element, the German mind delights in it, upon the pretext that chaos renews. "*Stirbe und werde!*" But in practice everything ended in military organizations. She needed hard basins and trustworthy pipes, in which to pour the boiling metal and make it serve the ends of the Krupps, Thyssens, and Hugenberg's of industry and affairs, who lead the world of to-day.

Assia heard echoes of it in her work as a shorthand-typist, which made her a living machine to register the secret meetings of the Franco-German delegates of the great firms of heavy industry. Her unequalled technical skill, and her intelligent impersonality which effaced itself as if she wore the invisible ring on her finger, had brought her confidential posts in the suite of the French masters of secret politics and finance. It lay with herself to take advantage of it. She only took advantage of it for the sake of experience and the thirst for vengeance which she was secretly acquiring against Society. She also acquired a good deal of contempt for these nations of the poor and exploited, worthy folk who let themselves be led with a ring through the nose. They did what they liked with

them in Germany Thanks to their congenital incoherence, that cerebral fever which is at home in the skull of two-thirds of the Germans, those who think, or think they think, their ideological revolt was enlisted under the uniform of the Slavisms and Fascisms present, or to come, of the finance and violence of the brainers of liberty Assia could not understand why all these currents and furious winds banged themselves against the walls, and cannoned off in zigzags, or went round and round in spirals, instead of rushing into the only channel which led to a free and wide future, the narrow door which opened to the East upon the U S S R But save for a few nuclei of Communism, the obscure tenacious pride of the German privileged race, the ideological cretinism of the 100 per cent "Aryan" man, made even those who wanted Revolution at the price of their blood, want it, though they not admit it to themselves, made in Germany And the Slavists took advantage of it

But that issue—that door of the East which held Assia's eyes, why did she not slip through it herself? She hung about it, she approached, the draught from the door drew her, she felt herself sucked by it, but at the last moment she flung herself aside, and dragged herself away from the suction Why? Her true work should have been over there, she was daily more convinced of it, and others gave her to understand as much She did not pass unperceived at Berlin, nor at Oslo, she was kept under surveillance Djanelidze had pointed her out, and they knew that she was their voluntary ally, posted in the enemy's camp She soon realized that she was not the only one in the same position Just as on the eve of Great Invasions, the barbarians enlisted in the Roman army, the Revolution is creeping in to the great capitalist Headquarters, into the workshops and offices, into the ears listening at doors and the quick hands that tap out Stiff secrets Assia's eyes were caught by one or another of her comrades, her unknown, unexpected accomplices, typists or

secretaries, in the middle of the councils of war of the great captains of industry They smelled each other out, silently, the odour of the clan ! There was no need for paid enrolment The best enrolment is that of free instinct, that of the blood When a civilization is tottering on the eve of the eruption, the earth opens beneath its crust, and the breath of fire spreads through the veins It can infect a *bourgeois* son of a Western *bourgeois* quite as easily as the unclassed and uprooted The shaking of the whole European economy by the war, ruin, inflation, financial crises, unemployment and famine, delivered the body of Europe to the invasion of all the microbes of Revolution And what else is it but one of those great epidemics which do justice upon ruined social organisms, and periodically make way for new waves of humanity ? The phenomenon manifested itself more implacably in this fissured centre of Europe, as one drew nearer to the volcano

But Assia, who was a stream of molten lava from it, did not try to re-enter it, despite herself, her course carried her back towards the West Was it really the West ? Or one place, one spot, one magnet in the West ? She defended herself against it You only defend yourself from what threatens you, from what holds you She chafed against it in vain She had not recovered full possession of her soul and body Another's blood was mingled with hers She could not free herself from it She was obliged to face irritating facts Indirectly solicited to communicate to her comrades in arms the report of the secret deliberations of which her work made her a witness, she would have felt no scruple in delivering it to them, for she did not encumber herself with moral considerations for the enemy And yet she found it impossible to give it to them, a hand, a curb, was about her throat, she tried to get past it, she reared, the curb, the hand, dragged her back She gnawed at them She knew too well whose proud scruples bridled her, the bit which was making her mouth



---

## THE COMBAT

---

bleed She chewed over the taste of iron on her tongue Ah ! if she could have chewed the tongue too ! As it was not in her mouth she chewed her own, as if it had been the other's —with anger and voluptuousness

She was not the woman to deceive herself for long She could see what she did not wish to see So he still held her, that hated and rejected Marc ? What was there about him that she could not get away from ? She might have had twenty opportunities of finding another companion There was nothing to prevent her She had not done so At the last moment the other (no, no, not the other ! the one and only) intervened Why the only one ? He had not been so before Why should he remain so after ? She rebelled, she insulted him, she stripped him naked to depreciate him, like a buyer feeling the ribs of a skinny hare in the market He was ugly and scraggy, weak and violent, tender and brutal, a mad flame, intermittent, mediocre in bed and passionate, a sorry piece of game

"There's your hare, take him who likes ! I throw him in your face"

But scarcely thrown

"He's mine ! I'll keep him !"

But she did not intend that he should keep her, and that he should haunt her She accepted and appointed a rendezvous, so as to break the spell "You can wait till

Doomsday !" She did not go The only one who nearly triumphed was Jean Casimir, whom she met, and who paid shameless court to her, he seemed to her Marc's false *alter ego*, and as for him, the thief, it was perhaps because he also had a grudge against Marc that he wanted to rob his nest But as soon (it did not take long !) as she grasped this, she darted a look of rage at him, she hated him, hated him with contempt, like the mud on her shoes

"Marc ! my Marc ! What good is it that to escape you I should seek you by such shameful device ! But what is it

## THE COMBAT

about you that you hold me so ? Ah ! there is this about you, whatever you are, you are my own ! ”

She was at one of the secret conferences of her employer, the delegate of the great Industrial Trust, busy taking down the discussion in shorthand, when she began to soliloquize in this way Marc, her Marc, had swooped down upon her, he covered her with his long wings, with his thin limbs

“ My skinny one ! My ugly bird ! My lean hare !  
All carcass, with thighs like sticks, and knees like stakes, and  
hard hands that are soft and feverish and leave bruises  
And your furies, and weaknesses, now child, now tyrant, and  
your caresses, and your insults, and your torments that harass  
and scourge one, and then beg a tender word for consolation,  
that seek my breast and bite or suck it ! Little brute !  
Beloved ! I have revenged myself Not enough !  
Bite me again ! Harder ! Ah ! how I would like  
to make you scream ! ”

She wrote it unconsciously She found it, in shorthand, in the middle of accounts of steel and coal She had very nearly drawn him—in gross (in leanness) and in detail She gaped when she woke, and looked at her cabalistic pages, and closing her lips she was inwardly convulsed with laughter

“ Marc, my Marc ! Ah ! it's no use going on deceiving myself ! I deceive everybody but myself ”

Now, she had to confess to herself that she loved everything in him, even and above all what had wounded her most His proud uncompromising attitude, his independence even without action, even without an object, even his hardness now seemed to her beautiful, wholesome, worth taking, even worth knocking against till one bled—when she compared them with these slimy souls, made of mud and spittle

“ I want him ! And I will have him But if he won't now ?  
All the more reason ! I should like to see him at it !  
I will do without his leave Yet if it should be

---

## THE COMBAT

---

too late ? If he should have reorganized his life ? Well then, he will undo it again !

She was uneasy all the same. She knew nothing about him. Annette's letters, which she begged for, told of herself and the child, but never mentioned the only one whose name and news she waited for, and she could not ask after him. Jean Casimir, perfidiously, to pay her out (he did not attach much importance to it) told her of an echo from Paris concerning Colombe fished out of the Seine, which gave the initiated to understand that she had not fallen from Scylla into Charybdis, but from one river into another. Assia understood the allusion and dug her nails into her palms.

" Dirty play-actress ! "

If she had been near the Pont Saint Michel she would have been more likely to hold her mouth under the water.

" Ah ! you want to act ? Then play out your part ! "

She returned to Paris. She had been hesitating for some days. Every day she packed her things and every night she unpacked them again. This last incident brought her to a decision. She took the train. Even if she did not see him, she must be nearer to him. There was no question of laying down her arms ! In the train, on the way back, she doggedly went over the whole case with redoubled hostility. She admitted that she had wounded Marc cruelly, she had agreed to marry him knowing exactly what he was like, what he expected her to give him, and observe towards him, she had been resolved, whatever her own opinion might be, to confine herself loyally in their union within the moral and social limitations of her companion. She would have admitted that in the first impulse of his grief and anger, he might have struck or even killed her. " These are the risks of the trade," as that king said when he was stabbed. One should not fly from the consequences of one's actions. But she could not endure that he should have insulted and despised her, pride and her sense of justice were equally wounded by it. She did

not see (perhaps she did see) that Marc's passion for her still equalled his contempt in violence, and that his contempt was due to despairing passion. She could bear everything from him but contempt. Again, at that moment, in the roaring train, her blood roared louder. She repeated

"I will never forgive him!"

She saw Annette once more. She saw Vania. They talked of everything but Marc, the touchy one must be the first to mention him. And Assia would sooner have broken her teeth than let that name pass through them. But she often came to see Annette, and she found clumsy pretexts for coming, she waited, they both waited, watching each other's lips. Until Vania, who had not the same reasons to keep silence, and perhaps had some to be prompted by grandmama, asked calmly, with his nose in the air, "And when are you coming back to sleep with daddy?"

Assia turned pale, blushed, sprang up in a fury, with all her quills up. And she went away. But on the stairs she laughed.

"The rogue! The little monkey!"

Then she thought that Annette had put him up to it, and to punish her she laid it on herself not to go and see her for a whole month. She held out for a week, and then went every day. But she was determined not to give in.

Marc was just as obstinate. He was quite ready to confide more intimately in his mother. When they were alone together he returned with melancholy to the past, and he did not shrink from acknowledging his disappointment, not with others, but with himself, his mistakes and the irreparable harm one causes. There were long conversations, interspersed with long silences—tender, bitter, ironical and detached, between the mother and son, upon the folly of love that would monopolize another being, its tyrannical demands, its childish furies, its murderous jealousy. How ridiculous and how pitiful! Annette scanned her boy's face, which had

---

## THE COMBAT

---

grown thinner and prematurely older , the little fresh wrinkles round his eyes, the line of the mouth, less irascible, more weary It sent a pang to her heart But she knew that only the lance of Aschilles can cure what it has wounded The two enemies had but to stretch out a hand and seize it But the two fools refused to do it Annette was sure that they loved each other, that they wanted each other , but neither of them was willing to show his want first They only willed their own ruin

Yet they were at the end of their tether , they could no longer bear not to see each other ! For Marc knew that Assia was back in Paris , and both had been warned by Annette of the days and hours she reserved for each of them, so as to spare them (said the good woman) the pain of meeting On those days they artfully managed to see each other, near Annette's house, each trying to see without being seen The best of it was that each thought himself the only one to indulge in this game of hide-and-seek And every time that lying in ambush in the street, at a shop corner, either of them caught sight of the other's silhouette, their hearts leapt in their breasts, they all but rushed forward, or sank down, their legs giving way Waves of heat and cold swept over them, and they went home exhausted, bloodless, with dry mouths, after which their whole day was wasted

Such a state of things could not continue The time was bound to come Marc was at his mother's that day Annette had at last made up her mind to suggest the possibility of a reconciliation , but Marc flatly refused, and roughly cut her words short Assia was on the watch on the other side of the street opposite the front door , she waited, hidden behind a lorry, for Marc to come out But he was a long time She could bear it no more She crossed the road and went into the house She only meant to be nearer She waited, pricking up her ears, at the foot of the stairs When she heard Annette's door, on the fourth floor, open, she would go out

again The door opened, and she went up Her will had nothing to do with it, her legs carried her up She went up like a somnambulist Not a trace of reflection left But her hearing sharpened, was a sounding-box, amplifying the footsteps of him who was coming down They saw each other half-way up Assia had just reached the second landing Three or four steps further up, at a sharp corner, Marc was coming down Their blood stood still, but their automatic steps did not stop Instead of waiting on the landing, Assia in her confusion went on to the narrow turning which hardly left room for two people to pass each other They passed, stiff and straight, brushing against each other, nearly slipping, Marc was squeezed against the wall, Assia almost hanging to the stair-rails He held his breath She, with closed mouth, breathed heavily through her nose

They had passed Marc was now on the landing They both turned back at once They made a rush Marc seized Assia, who was two or three steps above him, below the hips His face was level with her body, he buried it against her womb, the traitorous, the sacred womb—his home—lost, recovered!

And Assia, losing her balance, slid down the stairs and found herself on the landing again, mouth to mouth all the dams had given way

At the noise of her slipping, a door opened on the next floor They let go of each other What were they to do? Where could they find shelter and disappear in the depths of the abyss of recovered joy? At his lodging? At hers! They had no strength left to walk They could not have forced their way between the banks of the crowd in the streets They did not want their love to be swallowed by that tide But one way of escape—they fled, upstairs, to the door on the fourth floor!

Annette opened it She found them with fingers interlocked, devouring each other with their eyes, like Raphael's lovers in Trastevere She hardly made a gesture of surprise

---

## THE COMBAT

---

She laughed with joy, and effaced herself    They flung themselves inside    Nothing was said    "*Happy nations have no history*    " Annette shut the door of her room upon them  
They stayed there all night

The mother was in the other room, sitting by the child's bed    She whispered with the boy    He was deeply interested, curious, happy, too knowing    He fell asleep, laughing, holding grandmama's fingers

And in the dark, Annette brooded over wounded happiness, and love kissing the wounds, the prodigal son, the daughter, too—the wanderers who had lost and found their home    They had come home    She had them there, on the other side of the wall, against her bed    And the mother pressed her happy hands upon her womb    And, in her womb, her two children

## PART TWO



## XIX

"He caught her, on her sugar lips he kissed her, hard against his heart he pressed her They remained there, slightly reclining, and of the rest they also did a little Come, enough ! I will tell no more "

Thus says the folk tale of *Beautiful Maria-Raven-locks*, that "raven-locked " Assia, full of tales, told Vania, more than once

But this moon was not like the first honeymoon It was no longer the honey of flowers, honey of the spring But autumn honey (and yet, they were so young !) honey of the fir of bitter savour, dark and golden Love ripened by sorrow is the most ardent It no longer spends itself in prodigal sport It needs but the presence of the beloved, there, by its side It is never weary of feeling with every sense, with all that life has given us, that narrow body that outlines and limits us, but does not contain the whole of us " Beloved, beloved, is this really you ? "

*Amantito, amantito*

*Amante, amante*

"My lashes hinder me from looking at you " <sup>1</sup>

And they fall back, exhausted

*"Cling and I cling to thy love  
As lizards to the wall " <sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> " *Las pestañas me estorban  
Para mirarte "*

<sup>2</sup> " *Arrimato a no querer  
Como las sulamanquesas  
Se arriman a la pared "*

Spanish folk Coplas

## THE COMBAT

The lizard sleeps with open eye      The eye does not see, it  
drinks the sunlight      What sees is the warm side against the  
wall, it is all the long outstretched body      "You? Are  
you there?"

And they have not even strength left to move      An  
immense lassitude, centuries of lassitude to be repaired  
Who would have thought that they had so many nights' sleep  
to make up      Even when they thought they had slept, dur-  
ing those months of exile, far from their own land, they wore  
themselves out in suffering and struggles, and insatiable regret  
gnawed them      Now that they had each other, had each  
other again, they had not even strength to take possession of  
their own, it was enough to know that it was there by their  
side

"I sleep, I have got you, you have got me, I sleep      "  
Assia slept, and slept      She would never finish sleeping

## XX

When they began to wake (intermittently, never both to-  
gether), each contemplated the other, sleeping by his side  
Like Psyche holding the lamp, they scrutinized the lover's  
body, and the face, like a book of wounded love, which betrays  
itself in sleep      Both were shocked at reading the secrets of the  
grief and revolt which, during the months of separation, had  
left the marks of their claws on that familiar face, which they  
could not recognize      It was the same, and it was different  
What was changed?      And as they questioned the mirror of  
that face, the face of the sleeper, they found there, by rever-  
beration the reflection of their own      the face watching and  
observing, theirs also, was not the same, it was different  
What was changed?      In both a work of deep tillage had  
been done      The ploughshare had passed over them, and the  
seeds had sprouted

First of all, the first corn another love Yesterday's was burnt \ Another was born A love made up of gratitude and passionate abnegation For, at the price of their suffering, they had proved what they were to each other, and that one could not live without the other The pride that set them in opposition was broken And what joy that it was broken ! The door opened between their hearts

" I am your dwelling-place Live in me ! I am deserted if you do not fill me Ah ! what a marvel, as Gorki says, to love a human creature ! Why this one ? I do not know All I know is that this is the one I love And his love has raised me from the dead And I, it was I, who crucified him ! (Assia, bending over Marc's sleeping body, kissed the wound of the lance in his side ) " May I never make him suffer again ! "

And in Marc's eyes, when awake, she read the same fear of hurting her, the same tender solicitude Both, having been wounded, were immediately aware of the least quiver of the beloved's skin These attentions, shown in a thousand imperceptible ways, modified the depths of their souls Each tried secretly to be that which would please the other Each repressed the natural tendencies which might jar those of the other They had both acquired a feeling of humility to which they had not been used There was no question now of one being in the right against the other It was better to be in the wrong oneself Assia no longer tried to force Marc beyond his limitations, or not before the proper time , in these days of reunion she found her joy in adapting her steps to the rhythm of the beloved's It was enough for her that they walked together

" Take your own time ! Don't hurry ! I am with you, we have time enough ! "

Even if Marc was not able, without doing violence to his own nature, to reach the goal which seemed natural to Assia, Assia no longer cared to reach the goal without him Her

---

## THE COMBAT

---

first task, her first duty and her happiness (her heart knew it now) was to help the beloved to realize his own nature. He was her child, her real child—more than the little boy. The little one was produced once for all, but the grown-up child she carried still in her womb, she was making him, brooding over him, she was shaping him with her tenderness and her blood.

She remembered Annette's words, in the days after the rupture

"We are the mother. We must have pity on our child."

She reminded Annette of it when they were alone.

"It's true. Even during the embrace, the strongest feeling (the most obscure, but I see clearly into him now), is the feeling of being the mother, and the supreme sweetness is to rock him in our body, he who takes us while surrendering himself—our grown-up child."

Annette said

"It does not do to show it too clearly. A wise mother knows how to spare the pride of her little one, who thinks himself grown-up. She must learn the good lesson of serving him as a field for experience, clumsily to exercise his growing strength against her. She bears his injustice with indulgence, she even finds a secret pleasure in it. Of him we love, our child, we make a man, he becomes a man at our expense. And that is love. Love begins with a wound."

"It was I who wounded him, my big boy. I have not been a wise mother."

"One only learns to be that after failing in it."

"For you the wise virgins are last year's foolish virgins? You would not have closed the door to them?"

"I would sooner have closed it on the wise virgins, who refused to lend their oil. I am not a good evangelist."

"Yes, you lent me your oil, and my lamp is alight again. The bridegroom has come back. I've got him, I've got him, and I'll keep him, I will not let my candle be blown out again."

*'Au clair de la lune!'* I watch over my fire."

Marc looked at the little watcher bending over him. He clearly saw her vigilance in sheltering the relighted flame of love between her hands, and the rosy light of the lamp on her tender, anxious face. Assia's care in protecting Marc's liberty and in not hindering him in his development, was not lost upon him. He was touched that she should seem willing to sacrifice her own law to him. He was not the man to accept it. It only made him more conscious of the duties he was contracting towards her. Her act of faith in him obliged him to make himself worthy of her—not to disappoint her expectation. To march on. And to the end!—Not that he could ever sacrifice the sincerity of his nature to her. He knew (and she knew it too, by now) that it would be betraying her, if out of weakness for her he should betray himself. His sincerity was his marriage portion, the common property of the pair. He must watch over it, but by taking care that it should not remain unproductive, that this interior force should fulfil itself, that the torrent should cut its channel between the hills. He must solve the enigma of the contradictory needs of the spirit, and from the conflicting laws of his soul bring forth the wider law which embraced them all.

It was here that the unexpected virtue of love was revealed—the new love which renewed Marc's blood, through his wound. For, by ridding him of certain warm illusions of blind life, the selfishness of the flesh, and the folly of monopolizing another being—love led him to strip himself of selfishness of spirit—the most fatal—that of his ideologies, and absolute convictions. It helped him to pass from one plane of life to another, from the individual to the social plane. As in these first months of *Vita Nuova*, Assia found her natural joy in subordinating her pride and independence to loving service of Marc—Marc was moving towards the sacrifice of his chaotic individualism, bending beneath the pressure of the demands of social action and combat, which Assia's love unwittingly whispered to him. She had no need to ask it of him. It was

---

## THE COMBAT

---

enough for her to become himself, so that he might become herself, and find therein, as if they were his own, the vigorous elementary instincts, which were essential to Assia's nature. Needless to say, such a blending of two minds was only possible in the paroxysm of the early days, when the two bodies had found each other again. Later on the bond had to be relaxed, and the independent course of two interior lives move onward side by side. Such is the law. But from those moments when they had penetrated each other to the centre, and blended to the point of being more the other than themselves, they had retained an impregnation of the soul which could never be effaced. The taste remained in their mouths. Even if they wished to wash it off their tongues (there were times when such haunting savoured of fever) they could have found no water which would cleanse their palates. They had to live with their ill—with their good—each with the soul of the other grafted to his body. They could feel it throbbing like a tooth. A tooth to be cut. New teeth. Like young animals they sought for something to gnaw, to cut their teeth upon. They were hungry. Hungry for action.

### XXI

There was a difference between the two. Assia's hunger was all pleasure, for it was healthy and carefree. "I am hungry, I eat. So much the worse for what is eaten!" But Marc's hunger could not forget the right-to-live of the eaten, as of the eater. All life in progress walks over victims. No really new society can be built save upon the ruins of that which preceded it. And those ruins are not stones, they are bodies with blood in them. To know the taste of that blood, Marc had but to lick his own wounds, in the combat imposed upon his will, he found himself, by his very nature, on both sides. the blows he gave, he received himself. The cruelty of

---

## THE COMBAT

---

the combat was doubly felt by him—striker and stricken. And the ideology of the combat clashed with his own—that mass proletarian spirit offended him personally in his inveterate aristocracy of the intellectual individualist, who strives in vain—he must believe in the privileges of the intellect and caste which are identified with himself, if he ceases to believe, he feels lost!

Marc only succeeded in saving himself by an ascetic reaction, which punished itself—him and his caste—for their recognized unworthiness by condemning himself to the hard service of the proletarian class, and to the methods of combat which that service implied. He had worn the old garments of destructive or sterile individualism till they were threadbare. He had seen and touched in his intellectual companions the prostitution of those ideas which were dear to him—liberty of spirit, and non-violence. All the ideologists of the *bourgeoisie*, great and small, had commerce with those ideas, those prostitute ideas procured for them cheaply the voluptuous pleasure of a magnanimous and comfortable intelligence that takes no risks. There were some to suit every hide, objectivism, idealism, aestheticism, honour, pity, respect, virtue, individual freedom of conscience, humanity. They had passed through so many beds that they could accommodate themselves to any shape—all minds could fit into them. Thus the intellectuals escaped any painful contact with reality, rough hands, dirty hands, and blood. They made use of their ideas, their prostitutes, to escape the responsibilities and risks of social action. With the best of them, it was not only pusillanimity, fear of blood, it was above all secret wounded pride—they were quite willing, if necessary, to devote themselves to the cause of the people, but on condition that they did not lose their place of honour, that they remained the privileged elect who direct the uneducated masses, the professors who teach *ex cathedra*. Under the fiction of a democracy, they would not admit, though they dared not say so, the insolent equality of the

---

## THE COMBAT

---

proletariats, who accepted them, but in the ranks. If they had been forced by necessity, as in the U S S R, to co-operate with the masses, they could not have restrained themselves from conspiring, in their hearts, or in fact, to establish an oligarchy of technicians, either material or intellectual. The proletarian or *petit-bourgeois* origin of the majority did not prevent them from assuming a patronizing attitude towards those whom they regarded as inferiors. In all times, the most disdainful and hardest towards the people have been those who, born of the people, have raised themselves, by suppleness or by the strength of their wrists. The stewards of the *ancien regime* were the watchdogs of the privileged classes. Nowadays, the intellectuals and technicians are the watchdogs of the *bourgeois* class. Marc knew them through and through and what had helped him to read their secret thoughts was that he had found the same thought at the back of his own head, he had been obliged to extirpate it. And that was also why he fought them with greater energy for in them it was himself, one of his "selves", a "self" abjured, that he was fighting.

In a night of feverish struggle with himself, one of those *Quatre août* nights in which one frees oneself of privileges, Marc freed himself from his individual liberty, and took upon himself the task of serving the common action of the masses who are bent on renewing the social order. But his mind was not clear upon the position he should take up in the order of battle. For he could not get beyond the idea of sacrifice. He jibbed at the idea of violence. By an effect of the same passionate reaction against his instincts, which made him harshly subdue his individualism, his mind refused to accept, for himself, the use of that violence to which he was, by temperament, too prone. He knew by experience that if he set foot in it, he would be drowned. And he had good reason to believe that the same thing was true of the majority. Violence is too strong a wine for men. One glass is enough to make them lose control.



---

## THE COMBAT

---

of their reason And yet the Europe of to-day cannot act without it It has been used to that alcohol for too many centuries What can be done to cure the habit? Words are of no avail Only the example of action Only sacrifice But sacrifice in the service of the order of battle

Such a decision appealed to the most heroic and purest energies But it lacked that touch of light the joy that alone crowns action with a halo This great effort to purify himself, to sacrifice himself, to renounce, wrapped the young man in secret melancholy He hid it from Assia, and Assia did not notice it for her nature, perhaps no less complex in substance, but less thin-skinned, took little account of such scruples in action She respected the problems which were tormenting Marc but she left him to solve them alone It sufficed that she was ready, in advance, to follow him in whatever line of action he decided upon Love gave her confidence in Marc But let him choose, and let him act! To this woman, in full vigour, everything, even love, was action She was a tree turned to the sun, life in progress, the flood of day Let us conquer the day! Day after day, let us seize the day Introspection is out of date

If Marc wished to tell another of his mental struggles, he turned to his mother, already raised above action to the waist, and bathing in it from the knees to the soles of her feet, she was well fitted to understand the tragic duality of her son She saw him still impassioned for life, but no longer quite the dupe of life he judged it as he clasped it And the fullness of his flame rose upward, through life, towards a future, a beyond, which he could not see, but which he wanted and sought for, like a blind serpent reaching out The son spoke little to his mother of that secret life They exchanged it with each other by contact Thus their blood reached the same degree of temperature, it attained a common point of equilibrium This was the chief benefit of their unfinished colloquies for Annette could read her boy clearly, but she could not read

---

## THE COMBAT

---

further for him, she could not advise him as to what he ought to do

Thus he stood between the two women who loved him, but who could not help him to go forward, except by going with him, they were ready to accompany him wherever he might go, but they could not or would not say to him "Go there!" They waited for him to tell them. He thought it just. He was the man. But to decide for both of them and for himself did not simplify the problem for him. All three had their own law. How find the beautiful chord of three notes which would give out their full harmony?

While waiting for intelligence to discover it, instinct, wiser and more sensitive, was leading them towards it. The secret exchange of their natures communicated to Marc, through Assia the fiery sap, the impulse to action—through Annette the calm front that holds back the flood-gate of action. And to both women he was the stable point, the tree to which their vines could cling. He wedded them to each other.

### XXII

They compared their experiences during the months of separation. Assia's, in Central Europe, were heavy with meaning, since from her listening post she had surprised fragments of the "Secrets of the Gods." They completed the revelations which Annette had gathered through her intimacy with Timon. They confirmed Marc's intuitions and apprehensions in his wanderings like a lost dog on the pavement of Paris.

It was clear that Europe and the world were delivered over to the hidden might of monstrous industrial and financial powers, who manipulated the states, democracies and Fascisms, everything served their turn. Kings of the Balkans, sold princes who sold their people, *condottieri* and *duci* levelling

---

## THE COMBAT

---

their revolver eyes, great jaws breathing war and pogroms, heroes of the dagger, bludgeon and castor-oil—or equally the noble fathers of the Immortal Principles of '89, those sleepy pears, and the pettifoggery of Parliaments—Hitler, Horthy, Mussolini or Pilsudski—and why not? the loud-speakers of Paris, Prague, London, Geneva or Washington everything can be used, brigandage and idealism, noble candour and infamy, it is only a matter of paying the price glory, money, or crime Something for every taste! The simplest and the most artful were snared once a finger was caught in the machinery, the whole animal was drawn in Fear completed the capture, of which flattery and little friendly presents had been the bait The big fish were caught on the hook

The game would have been won but for two conditions these world-masters should have agreed between themselves as to the division of the world, they should have united against the only formidable enemy who was preparing the world's counter-offensive the U S S R, which was arming behind the wall of red-hot steel of their great Plans These conditions were elementary A child would have understood them But these stout-limbed, brawny giants of money and business, as Timon used to say, had very little brains Their great, short-sighted, bloodshot eyes could not succeed in turning from their antagonistic passions, their vanities and rival interests of the day For years they had been incapable of presenting a united front to the enemy These world buyers let themselves be bought, and mutually betrayed each other, for a stolen cake, a contract concluded with the wise enemy, which benefited them at the expense of their rival Thus they had let the huge proletarian factory grow, which day and night was forging their ruin

But, at the eleventh hour (and the first quarter had even struck), they had, at last, perceived the shadow of the factory lengthening over them And they wanted to form a union The Holy Union All their trumpets and church bells sounded

it It was late in the day! The earth was quaking The first shocks were splitting the main walls of capitalism Several massive pillars had fallen suddenly Stinnes, Timon, Loewenstein Those that remained, the most powerful, must stand together Assia had witnessed the attempts to group together the great industrial Trusts, and the Franco-German Fascisms Other tentacles were feeling each other under the seas, between the Anglo-Saxon countries, the British Empire and the U S A , to glue the Octopus together again , they spread birdlime for the *bravi* for sale and the ready-for-anything Fascisms of Italy and the Balkans A cloud of spies and *agents provocateurs* swarmed like green-fly in every corner France maintained on her very soil a White Army of mercenaries—cannon-fodder, ready to be sent at any moment here or there, in the interior or abroad And between Paris, London and Moscow, through Prague, Riga and Warsaw, there was a coming and going of secret agents, who insinuated themselves into the U S S R to disorganize, cause strikes in the works, foment rebellions and lay a concrete road for the attacking war-chariots of the Invasion heralded six months ahead by the silly crowing of the white generals and the Dutch Petrol-king

Western " Liberalism " made no move And the rancours of Socialisms, ulcerated by the unbridled polemics of Communist bawlers, feigned ignorance A convenient deafness dispensed them from intervening Yet they must be forced to hear! And so must those fat and quiescent intellectuals of the Left parties, who did not wish to appear indifferent to the murder of a new world, but were still more unwilling to compromise themselves in its defence They were deaf and crying " Baa ! " like Maître Pathelin's shepherd

" Wait a bit ! I'll soon shake you up ! The howls of S O S will pierce your ears at last "

But where install the instrument ?

Marc, with a few brave young men who were not afraid to take risks (they had everything to lose, nothing to gain), was

---

## THE COMBAT

---

among the first, in France, to organize fighting groups in defence of the U S S R Assia had done nothing to persuade him to it Nothing but to be, and be loved For he caught her thought, like the perfume of her clothes Between two night-companions the thought that needs expression to be caught is a scentless flower Assia's perfume of acacia rose warm from her garden She was too knowing to let Marc see that the odour of her thoughts clung to the hairs of his body She seemed to follow Marc—In short, both were following the track which led to their true goal, to that right action which is the maturity of every full life It was their proper line of development It was adjusted to that of the epoch, marching towards the necessary Revolution In the great upheavals of the earth, little streams follow the same slope as the rivers, and all mingle their waters Even Annette, who by reason of her age and mental struggles had reached level ground, where the current runs quietly, participated in the progress, and reflected a calmer sky, moved in the same direction

With the help of his old employer Marc added to the book-binding workshop a little printing-press, from which issued irregularly pamphlets sounding the alarm, or dealing with social combat, translations of Marx, Lenin and masters of international action, books of documentary evidence, and appeals and pamphlets which Marc edited Assia was naturally his translator from Russian and German, and sometimes Annette from English or Italian But she was not so zealous, she lagged over her translations, especially when they were books on economics or social theory, she played truant with little Vania, whom she had not given up after his mother's return, also she was taken up again by her dream life, as her day declined, they would catch her idling absent-eyed like a schoolgirl before her book or copybook they had to rouse her

"Now then, sleepyhead! Is that how you guard our field?"

Assia loved to hustle her And it did not displease Annette

---

## THE COMBAT

---

to be hustled. She returned, but leisurely, to her field. Whence she returned, she told no one, though Assia teased her to find out. The galloping activity of her two colts amused her. She did not try to moderate it.

She opened other fields to them. Her old liberalism, and her memories of Rumania made her more keenly alive to the Fascist outrages in Latin countries. She had kept up friendships there, and she helped to make her son's bookshop one of the centres of Italian antifascist emigration. They brought it their custom, richer in discussions than money. It was not easy for them to agree with Communism. They even had some trouble in agreeing among themselves. They exhausted themselves in efforts to rebuild a democratic edifice undermined by the Great War, an edifice at which revolutions and counter-revolutions were simultaneously firing their cannons. They were doubly exiled from their own country, and from their own times. Annette understood them, though for herself she had accomplished the renouncement of much that she, with her generation, had believed in and loved, the ideals of her youth, which she had seen grow old with her, and which would give place (it is the law of life) to the ideals of another youth. She was the intermediary between these two epochs of liberty, and she tried to make them mutually esteem, on the one side the dying grandeur of the old *bourgeois* idealism issued from the ruins of the Bastille, and on the other the renewal of the world by the heroic materialism of the proletarian Revolution. She was not one to bother about set names. Materialism or idealism, let the fire of life take any name it chose! All that mattered was that it should blaze.

Marc, like his mother, had a tendency to sympathize with the *fuoruscite* the tragedy of their fate, aliens to the times, was secretly akin to him, though his deliberate will saved him from it. He made himself their champion. Assia thought her Don Quixote was defending a lost cause. But she had laid it upon herself never again to hinder the quests of her knight on

---

## THE COMBAT

---

Rosinante , and though she laughed at them, she loved his long legs, and his lance-thrusts The latter brought Marc the gratitude of the exiles, and the honour he could have done without of attracting the attention of the Fascists agents in France The little deserted street where the bookshop lay was enlivened by certain strollers who took an extraordinary interest in the humble shop-windows of the district , the bookshop benefited by long visits from customers who turned over the books interminably before making up their minds to buy , and Marc received, even in his home, Italian admirers of his articles, who, with too emotional gratitude, displayed a vehement antifascism, in words which made Assia prick up her ears, as she stood in the passage, mounting guard before her big boy's door For he was not cautious enough , he had to be reminded that in politics it is better to listen than speak, before acting A year of flies ! They swarmed over Europe in those days Those of the Italian O V R A were particularly harassing in Paris The antifascist colony had to be ever on the defensive against them for the ignominy of people whose honour had seemed well-established would be suddenly revealed even men, friends whom they thought themselves sure of, were found, too late, to be beaters for the Fascist secret police, who had come to pick out victims, and push them into the toils So great had grown the appetite for lucre and infamy in the rotten post-War hotbeds, especially among the young, thrown out of their course Assia had a nose for this which was rarely at fault , and more than once she singed the wings of various insects who tried to intrude themselves on Marc , a certain tone, a certain look was enough to make them take themselves off they took care not to persist But an hour's absence was enough Marc could hardly resist appeals to his pride or pity , he was too ready to share his purse and his confidence

The Communist Camp was hardly less dangerous The War had taught governments to make use of the shameful

vices hidden in the bellies of so many "honest men"—"honest Iagos"—who are eager to nourish them, or (better still !) to be nourished by them Their aptitude, hitherto unknown, for betraying, spying, and denouncing were richly cultivated Following the experienced footsteps of the ancient Holy Russia of the Tsars, and of the grand master of political perfidy, the Intelligence Service, the prop of the British Empire, the leaders of French democracy now made use of the *agent provocateur*, as a method of government, they had some impartially in every camp of the opposition, right and left—in the Revolutionary party and among the *Messieurs du Roy* The machinery of a political police had grown formidably in fifteen years Following the example of the Intelligence Service, it aimed at becoming a State within a State One might already foresee the day when, in order to remain in office, the First Minister would be obliged to make himself the first "copper" of the State, (or the second the under-Chiappe) Liberty had but another hour to breathe before they wrung her neck Let us imitate Marc, and make the most of the hour !

By his attacks Marc risked more than once man-handling by the police and even assassination—getting knocked on the head coming home at night, in the shadow of some doorway by licensed waylayers—But they had reckoned without Assia's revolver, which forestalled them and fired into the group the wounded man was not anxious to make himself known And later on, without Marc or Annette getting wind of it, Sylvie appeared on the scene

Assia had warned her there was no love lost between the two, but they sealed an alliance for the defence of their boy Sylvie had friends in all ranks of society, some in the Press, and some in Parliament She enjoyed the privileges accorded in Paris to certain female sentinels of fashion, gallantry and wit—especially when they are getting on in years, to the Parisian nose well-known women, like wine, acquire more bouquet with



age Sylvie made use of this pre-eminence, and of her sharp tongue, to make the gentlemen of the "Tour Pointue" understand that they must keep their hands off her nephew's private preserves, 'ware scandal! The League of the Rights of Man was warned. And even old Roger Brissot<sup>1</sup> was made to get a move on! (If Marc had known, he would have strangled Sylvie.)

Brissot was then Keeper of the Seals, gorged with honours and wealth, the chief pillar of twenty Administrative Councils of the most powerful Financial Companies who shared amongst them the power of France, and the spoils of the world. A word from him was equal to a command. He had come to the end of his life, suffering from a disease—cancer of the liver—which would soon procure him national obsequies. Disgusted with everything, and still craving, he bore his existence like a gaping void, which he vainly strove to fill. The Pantheon, which he coveted, would not have been enough to fill the gap. Glory in stone belongs to death. He needed life—the life we leave behind us. He was leaving nothing but his speeches, which oozed boredom and stank of death. He was well aware of Marc's existence. His attempts to annex that living flesh, issued from himself, had met with insulting refusals—not even direct (Marc had not honoured him with a word) but by humiliating intermediaries. Brissot's present feeling for the man came very near to hatred. He would have liked to strike him out of his thoughts. And even if Marc had been struck out of existence, who knows but that Brissot would have been secretly relieved? But too many people had heard, through Sylvie, of Marc's shameful and renounced paternity. Brissot was held back by pride, by the secret control of public opinion which he feared. Short of playing the Roman Brutus, sacrificing his offspring on the altar of duty (for all his skill in rhetoric, such an oratorical exploit would have been a tough morsel to get anybody to swallow!) he was bound to protect his

<sup>1</sup> See *Annette and Sylvie*, and *Mother and Son*

offspring from the ambushes of the State  
*moi* " He was of it

" *L'Etat c'est*

He did what was needed. He was not really a bad man. He would have liked to love his son, and above all to be loved by him. He might be a corrupt statesman, as a family man he would have had his virtues—like the majority of French *bougeois*. Perhaps, if Marc and Annette had been willing to accept him, they might have had a good effect on him. But Marc and Annette had been pitiless. We cannot praise them for it. Inhumanity is too natural in young men. And as to women, even the best has often dark windings of the heart, impenetrable hardness, resentments she will not own to herself, so that she may not be forced to discuss them. Annette believed, in all good faith, that she never thought of Roger Brissot. She wished him no ill, since he was dead to her. But that was the most terrible thing. Subconsciously she had killed him, she refused him the air of the living. There is unknown crime in many hearts, which would be horrified at crime. And the best and most generous are not the least dangerous. They do not hate. They suppress. Better hatred than that calm annihilation. Even a Brissot was incapable of it. He had not sufficient personal energy. His hates, like his loves, were incoherent and only skin-deep. He had orders given that Marc should not be interfered with.

Marc never knew what he owed to his father, nor the complicity of the two gossips, his Assia and Sylvie. They took good care not to tell him of it. But the secret brought them nearer to each other. Without retracting her animosity against the intruder who had returned to the nest, Sylvie packed away her resentments in her bottom drawer (perhaps, some day, she would have occasion to take them out), and she condescended to reappear more frequently in the young couple's home. The freedom of her speech and her humour were in tune with Assia's, they laughed

heartily together, though they knew that peace was not signed but open truce and alliance they had their Marc to defend

So Marc went on selling and publishing books and pamphlets of propaganda, antifascist, anti-imperialist, pro-sovietic, pro-Gandhust, etc without deciding to take up a clearly defined position among these various lines of battle, but trying to make himself a link between the armies, and to lead them (Utopian dream !) to make common front against the massive forces of Reaction Of course, he did not succeed, and the only unity created between these troops of Resisters and non-Resisters, liberals and violent, was created by the official order that all should be smothered under the cloak of silence No newspaper ever mentioned them, not a single one of the publications could have been found in any kiosk or bookshop But they were, none the less, read and circulated under cover Marc's bitter and fiery genius, matured by combat and sorrow, allied with Assia's spirited slashing—she did not sign but coupled her mind with Marc's—soon captured an independent public, which conducted its own publicity, spreading gradually from place to place That is the best method It blazes over all obstacles like the hill-top fires that transmitted the signal in bygone days The signal reached isolated watchers in the most various and distant surroundings Correspondence began to pour in, and voluntary subscriptions Annette rejoiced to see her son's circle of action growing wider, without dwelling on the thought of where such action might lead him She was not unaware of the dangers She did not wish him to expose himself to them But she would not have liked him to shirk them She deluded herself with the hope that dangerous action was not for the morrow

Besides, there was in her, as in all strong characters, a substratum of fatalism, which agrees with the will ("I will what ought to be what ought to be will be") The current of the stream bears us along We have but to hold the tiller of the

boat Tiller, boat and current are myself The will of the stream be done !

### XXIII

Danger was remote, for the moment Marc's action still seemed inoffensive to the country that gave him shelter It was of a generous and general nature, to which the hypocrisy of a democratic State could skilfully accommodate itself The chief aim of Marc and his group was to defend the rights of the oppressed and exiled of all Europe, to be, or to create around themselves a bastion for liberties against universal Reaction France, favoured by victory which assured her a privileged economy for a few years longer, in the misery and fever of the rest of the Continent, could allow herself the luxury of an ideological liberty that cost her nothing Her policy of capitalist Imperialism even found a justification in the eyes of Europe in this opposition, and a screen behind which they warmed up the equivocation of a democracy with cheeks blown out with noble principles, while it secretly subsidized the Fascisms of Yugoslavia, Poland, and the Balkans, and maintained on its own soil praetorians, White Guards Marc and his friends only became a nuisance when they attacked this lie But it was so managed that their invectives should make no stir In their ranks, there was no lack of good watch-dogs of the official equivocation who succeeded in defending it from the youthful intransigence of these disrespectful sons of Mother France they created salutary divisions among the opponents The little handful of obdurates were too few and too unknown to cause anxiety To persecute them would only have drawn attention to them They were tolerated—and kept under surveillance

But the intercrossing of human destinies was about to bring Marc's into contact with other destinies, richer in experience

and influence, which would reinforce him, in reinforcing themselves with him

XXIV

At this time an old lost friendship, supposed to be dead, now ripened and filtered of its impurities, came back into Annette's life—and through hers into her son's the friendship of Julien Davy, her ex-fiancé, when she was thirty<sup>1</sup>

She was ill at the time and confined to her room. Since she had contracted pneumonia in the marshes of Rumania, though she seemed cured, she suffered every winter from a recurrent and insidious form of influenza, apparently harmless, but which, in the long run, undermined her robust constitution. Meanwhile, it only showed itself in mild attacks, which forced her to take a fortnight's rest. During those weeks of enforced idleness when she had time to read, dream, and wander in the byways of the past, Annette chanced to meet her old companion of the dead years, who kept apart, like herself. She generally avoided these old paths too much of her fleece—loves, regrets, remorse, dreams, worries—was caught, here and there, on the bushes, there is no need to hunt for them. They are like the floating dandelion seeds that stick to one's clothes and cannot be got rid of. And, thank God! one has quite enough to do brushing off the dust of every day! If one had to go and gather up that of the past! Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

But when by accident the machine is momentarily at a standstill, the mind goes on turning like a squirrel in its cage, and finds itself back in the past. Annette found the old Annette, and her old lover, her Theseus who had abandoned Ariadne—Julien Davy.

It was not the first time in twenty years that she had come

<sup>1</sup> See *Summer*, second volume of *The Soul Enchanted*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

across his name Though she had not sufficient leisure to keep up with scientific publications (and if one ceases to follow it for a time, science goes at such a rate that one has to pant to catch up with it), she had sometimes seen his name on reviews and books It had always given her an imperceptible shock her first impulse was to turn away "I have seen nothing" But within a day or two she was back before the bookshop window, and there her indifferent glance did not hesitate She went off The title of the book was now inscribed in her brain The author's titles likewise He was a professor in the College de France He had worked well

She had a pang at her heart, but she was glad She would have been sorry to leave those she had loved behind Julien was progressing

But in what direction? She had never attempted to find out Mention him to anyone else? No! She supposed that he had continued his course in the old traditionalist Catholic spirit of his family During the War she had been too taken up with her own action and passions to notice the stifled echo of Julien's voice in Paris And Julien was not one to do anything to prevent his voice from being stifled! He was too proud to pit his lungs against the chorus of a hundred throats He did not speak for others He spoke for himself

Chance brought some scattered words of his speech to Annette, rather late in the day She was still with Timon, typing an article for him The door of his private room was open, while dictating, he talked to one person or another, who came in and out The name of Julien Davy emerged from this confusion And Annette pricked up her ears She missed no word of what Timon said about that "defeatist", that "damned usher of the Prussian College", who was "passing from Prussian blue to Kremlin red"

"I'll kick his arse!"

Without interrupting her typing, she asked

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"What has he done?"

Between two phrases of dictation he replied

"What does it matter to you?"

She answered

"I know him And esteem him"

Timon's visitor expected to hear his fury turned upon the imprudent secretary who dared to contradict his opinion But the *habitués* knew the power of the typist over the tyrant He crushed his cigar on the desk with a bang of his fist and choked

"Ah! You know him, do you? Ah! You esteem him? That b—— b——!"

He swallowed his smoke with a grunt

"Well, so do I!"

But he added

"But I'll have his skin, all the same!"

She asked once more

"What has he done?"

"Since you know him, why do you ask?"

She explained, in measured words, that she had known him a long time ago, she had lost sight of him He was on the track at once She felt his mocking glance searching her But, for the moment, he said no more, he related briefly, with his usual brutality, but without insulting her "type", that during the War Davy had played the inopportune part of pacifist and European, and, since the peace (the vice was incarnate in him!) he had taken the opposite part of advocate of the men-with-knives-in-their-mouths, and champion of anti-Europe (of the U S S R—as Timon judged it) And he concluded

"Are you satisfied? What do you say to it?"

She replied

"I say that if he has maintained two opposite theses, one or the other must be yours"

He burst out laughing

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"Do you think so?"

She smiled

"No, I don't"

She knew very well that theses did not interest him. It was the profits. And better still, gain or loss, it was the game. Theses are for those fools of idealists, the pawns who are moved about the chessboard. Then is it worth while raving against them? Eh! it's all part of the game.

Afterwards Timon recurred to the subject more than once, when he was alone with Annette, and though he did it without much delicacy, his teasing was not unkind, he wanted to know

And (how strange!) that Rivière, which had never given up to her closest intimates the secret sleeping under her waters, calmly opened herself to this brigand. Without the least embarrassment, with a smile on her lips, but with a grain of irony, she told him all about her misadventure when she was thirty. And he never thought of abusing her confidence, he chaffed her about it now and then, but it was a friendly slap. She was the first to laugh at herself. For all that, the subject was serious, or had been! It must not be touched with dirty hands. Timon's heavy paws did not touch it. And, without any request from Annette, Julien Davy was never attacked in the newspaper, his name was tacitly ignored. Timon contented himself with saying to Annette

"Hey! that idiot of yours, he's a famous hand at missing the train! Contradict that!"

Annette did not contradict it. And that the chief should say "he has missed it", made her feel a little avenged.

Did she want vengeance then? What! after fifteen years of complete forgetfulness over which so many other passions had passed, the mark still remained, and she smarted?

What woman can ever forget a wound inflicted on her pride, or her heart?

But Annette would not have wished for any other revenge. She was contented with that. If only Julien could have



---

## THE COMBAT

---

thought what the chief had just said ! Oh ! just once or twice in his life That would be quite enough ! She would not have wished regret for it to be a thorn under his feet After all, she had not scrupled to find *Ersatze* for him !

"And he, himself, poor boy, was probably only an *Ersatz* for the one we seek all our lives and never find It is best that we should each have gone our own way "

All the same, Annette was not sorry that Julien's route was not so very far from her own

### XXV

A quite platonic satisfaction ! She made no attempt to draw nearer to it, nor even to find out exactly what it was She had read nothing of Julien's until this illness gave her some leisure Perhaps it also gave her a slight fever, propitious to this looking backwards

And so, having succeeded, with an assumption of indifferent curiosity, in procuring one of Julien's books, through her young daughter-in-law, then another, then the whole lot ("When you are in bed you must resign yourself to being bored") she spent days with a blissfully troubled heart Assia, seeing her yawning with sleepy eyes, said

"Go to sleep ! It would be much better for you "

She docilely closed her eyes upon her joy

What was there that so moved and rejoiced her in those books, nearly all on science and history, where other eyes could see only the mirror of a disinterested mind, reflecting the laws of objective reality ? She saw, first of all, the intrepid spirit which bore no resemblance to the vacillations of the timid spirit which she had known "Which bore no resemblance ?" Which resembled ! Yes, indeed ! She alone had already perceived in him, under his trembling, the stifled

---

## THE COMBAT

---

impulses of his mind towards heroic truth, and she had brooded over them with her wings. She recognized her chickens! His and hers. They had broken the shell with their beaks. The real Julien.

"My Julien                      Here he is at last! He is born!  
And from what womb?                      From mine, from mine! I  
have borne him and given him birth. He is the son of my  
love and my suffering. I recognize him. I recognize my-  
self                      "

How could she help recognizing him? Sometimes the words were her own. She remembered when she had spoken them to him. And that he should have repeated them fifteen years later! Sometimes it was less than words, and infinitely more. It was the inflexions of her own voice, what he said was his own, but he had borrowed her mouth to say it with. His lips had retained the taste of it.

And she lay quite still in her bed for days, with closed eyes, bathing in joyous gratitude.

"Dear Julien!                      "

Was there not a good deal of pride in this, and through pride a good deal of illusion?                      Illusion?                      No, she was quite sure! She was the only person who knew it. But she did know. She could not be deceived. As to pride, she did not deny it. Truly, there was some pride. A little.

A good deal?

"Perhaps more than I admit! It's true, I am proud in all my actions, at bottom, even when I think myself most devoid of all personal consideration, when I will to be so, when I say to myself 'I am dead to myself, at last!'                      I am not dead. The old woman lives still.                      And how! How she claims her due!                      Her Julien.                      To think that I have had him, these last ten years, and that I never knew it!                      "

For, however much he had grown, he was hers. She did not think herself equal to him. She felt how much Julien's mind

---

## THE COMBAT

---

had gone beyond her She followed him from afar, to such and such a milestone on the way Beyond that she confessed she could not follow It would have taken too much time to catch up the advance which he and science had made beyond her, in fifteen years But still it flattered her pride He had gone so far, he had grown so great, her little one !

And she dreamed of what her life might have been with him She dreamed of it, for hours, lying still, in the hollow of her bed She felt tenderness, sadness, and amusement Her life was unravelled and reknit again, as she dreamed

Enough of dreams ! She was cured "*Life is a dream* " Perhaps ! But it is a dream in which bread does not drop into our mouths without being earned

She jumped out of bed And to work !

" My little Julien, we will meet again, when we reach the end ! But that won't be to-morrow "

She thought no more about it But Marc said to her

" You have grown younger "

She laughed

" People like us can only get a rest when they are ill "

## XXVI

Julien had never rested He was one of those who do not know how to rest He could not live without working Yet he had no need to work for a living But he needed work to fill his mental life That intensive brainwork blocked his door to other thoughts It blocked it badly The door swung ajar, draughts got in Julien was never warm

But he no longer sat still shivering in the old chimney-corner in the Quartier Saint Sulpice, as in the days when Annette knew him He had come out of the house of the past And he had flung off and left behind him all his heavy clothing

---

## THE COMBAT

---

of bourgeois prejudices Annette had seen correctly when she read his books

It had taken no little heroism for this French *petit bourgeois*, timid and fearful, dominated by an autocratic mother, cramped by the out-of-date clothes of the age-long spiritual convictions and morals of a right-minded conservative and clerical family, to dare at the age of past thirty-five, to examine himself thoroughly and gradually, without cheating his own mind, to strip himself of all that he judged to be false, after he had believed in it Afterwards one would feel terribly naked, and how show oneself thus before the eyes of those who have known you dressed in those lies with which they always cover their offended modesty—those who will not see the world's nakedness, who are horrified and cover the truth of the spirit, like a sex, with a fig leaf?

Juhen's case was all the more serious because he was not one of the sorry unfrocked who compensate themselves for what they have left by getting lodging in the shop next door and serving the rival passions of anti-clericalism and "free thought" He stood alone in the street, naked in the cold blast

It proved hard But the timid man never retraced his steps

Thank God he lived in a family circle which took no notice of his mental struggles (It is a great privation to have no one by the fireside with whom to exchange thoughts, but it is restful too what would become of anyone who at all hours, by his own hearth, had to meet the looks of an enemy of his thoughts?) Shortly before her death, his mother had married him to a healthy right-minded woman, absolutely negligible, richly dowered as was proper, pretty enough, insipid and a good housewife, but with a mind uninquiring to an extent rare even among her own kind she hardly ever opened a book, those she had been obliged to yawn over as a girl, in her pious establishment for young ladies, had bored her so that she thought

---

## THE COMBAT

---

one of the advantages of marriage was that it left her free to shut them. It did not bother her that her husband should pass his life among papers. Men have their own business, which did not interest her. She did not love him enough. She did not detest him, it was not unpleasant to her—nor, good Lord! a great pleasure—to see him every day, at meals and in bed, she was fairly greedy, he was not greedy enough. In short, she loved him well enough, but (like the Normans) not well enough to be interested in what went on in the man's brain. It did not come within her household duties to tidy up that cupboard.

Thus, she would have known nothing of the crisis which, at forty, shook him out of the contented passivity which accepts the social and religious order of so-called "*comme-ils-faut*" people, if well intentioned women friends, and even her confessor had not taught her the duty which is expected of a Christian wife, when her husband, by his example, causes spiritual scandal in the community. There followed tearful expostulations from the wife to her husband. The effect was disastrous to their domestic peace, and of no benefit to moral order for naturally the well-meaning Constance understood nothing whatever about her husband's delinquency and what she could say to him about it was not likely to amend it. He was very curt over anything that touched his freedom of thought. And on such a subject his wife's silliness was so flagrantly displayed that he had not the charity to hide it from her. She was conscious of it herself, but like all fools she only became the more pig-headed. Goodness knows how it would have ended for the pair if her confessor, shrewder than herself, fearing the public scandal for which the clumsy champion of religion was heading, had not hastened to stop her mouth. From behind, his grating, where the injured wife breathed forth her verbal muddle and nose-blowings, he now strove to calm the incoherent recital and fatal goodwill of his penitent, so imprudently wrenched from her blessed

---

## THE COMBAT

---

non-thinking She must be brought back to it It did not give him much trouble, she was quite ready to be convinced that God could not hold her responsible for her husband's sins, that trying to contradict the wanderer was to risk plunging him deeper in his perversity, that the best she could do was to offer her prayers to God for the unhappy man's salvation The rest lay with God ("The rest" was whether it pleased God that Julien should, or should not, be damned Constance sincerely hoped that he would not be But, however, if he was Well, she would rather not think about it! One has trouble enough over oneself! )

So when Julien, not free from remorse, and touched by the resigned victim air which his wife now adopted, attempted to excuse himself by explaining his views in an elementary fashion, like a teacher addressing a child of seven, she made a frightened gesture

"No, no! It was too tiring! And suppose she should happen to understand! As if climbing a glacier one should be roped to a fool who is sliding down No, thank you! I would rather not be roped to him Poor Julien!"

She said she was too stupid to understand, (she was proud and happy to be so "Blessed are the poor in spirit!") Poor Julien! And to think that the poor fellow was sliding down alone made her do her best to be perfectly sweet to him, and to make his life peaceful and quiet, and provide good cooking

"Let him, at least, have a little pleasure in this life, here below!"

Julien had no delusions as to the real significance of his companion's kindness But at least he had peace by his own hearth It was not a very warm fire—still, by turning up the collar of his cloak of thoughts, he could work with no risk of being disturbed He must not expect too much of life—since he had "muffed" it For he had "muffed" it He was

---

## THE COMBAT

---

sure of that. He felt it as an obscure obsession. He took care not to analyze his feeling. What was the use, now? He had had his chance. And he had done worse than let it slip, he had rejected it. He had divorced himself from her who should have been the true companion of his life. He had withdrawn himself from her in vain. For sixteen years his hidden life—dominated by the absent one—had gone on outside (inside) his visible life, his married and family life. It was not so much Annette's face, her material image (it was that too, but this intellectual was short-sighted in matters of the heart, and the image was blurred) it was not so much the vision of Annette as the fiery furrow she had left in the core of his mind. Julien's inner being had been transformed by it. Ever since the far-off days of 1905, when he had ceased to see her, she had not ceased working in him, regret and remorse had secretly moulded him in the spiritual image of what she would have wished him to be, or of what he imagined she would have wished.

Thus, he owed her the great effort of his life and the broadening of his enfranchised mind. That invisible fermentation changed water into wine, and planted the audacious seeds of the whole world in that stay-at-home mind. They took a long time to sprout, he was conscious of those free inmates within him long before those around him—family, friends, colleagues—had any suspicion of them. He was in no hurry to display them. The books he wrote during that first period nearly all devoted to science, gave proof of views which were original, but strictly limited to professional matters. Prudence? Consideration for those around him, whom he knew he must wound? Little inclination for fighting? Remains of his congenital timidity, which kept him silent upon his most secret self? Or was it not rather a more mysterious feeling, religious reserve upon what was deepest and most precious to himself and the imaginary witness of his inner life—his unreal Annette?

---

## THE COMBAT

---

But as to the real Annette—most singularly!—he had never attempted to see her again. He had even been afraid to inquire after her. And it was not brilliant! For fear of being troubled, he had avoided finding out if he might not have had occasions to help her in need, or danger. It was a case of the "*too soft-hearted*" who turn away from a crushed animal, because it is "*so painful*" or "*might be painful*", and make no attempt to dress the wound. We know such sorry fellows! But that he should be one of them, and be aware of it, was enough to make him choke with disgust.

Ah! It took him some time to eliminate the old defects of his character. And doubtless he never got completely rid of them. There always remained a certain amount of rust at the bottom of the vase, at which his nails were ever scratching.

But all have their rust, and Annette had hers. The essential thing, in the soul, is that the running water should prevent life's conduits from getting blocked up. Fresh water, new water. The only irremediable corruption to the soul, is that of the pond. The stream washes out its vase. She passed, the Riviere! She had torn him from his torpid immobility, from resignation to that purgatory of the spirit in which thousands of human infusoria vegetate. She had given him the impulse and revealed life to him by her passion, her suffering and her flame in the darkness.

And moreover (sad to say, but true!) by the very suffering which he had caused Annette, he had actually redeemed himself! To make one we love suffer unjustly, when we have the energy to realize it fully, may become an enriching revelation. To it Julien had ever since owed, through remorse, a deeper insight into men, an instinct for justice, a need to make reparation, by doing good to others, for the harm he had done to one. Annette had paid for him.

Julien belonged to the old French *bourgeoisie* which has many encrusted vices, and fingers that hold tight to money



---

## THE COMBAT

---

saved, but these *bourgeois* make a religion of money owed, and are feverishly anxious not to die before it is paid back. When they walk in the fields, the birds do not sing to them of love and springtime! But they hear the quail crying

“*Pay your debts!*”

Julien paid his

### XXVII

Who would have believed it? Did he ever really know it himself? It was to pay those debts that he found himself, during the War, thrown, much against his will, into the social *mêlée*, for which he had a physical and moral aversion.

In the preceding period, when his spirit, without surrendering, thrown back upon itself and concentrating its breath, was gathering energy to achieve its independence, the invisible Annette had been ever by his side. She had no need to speak. She marched on. He never asked himself where the road would lead him. There was but one road, the road along which the fine hips beside him were advancing.

In his works, he had gradually inclined towards the history and philosophy of science. And by the double effect of action and complementary reaction, his mind, while it freed itself from the network of Catholic creepers that hampered his limbs, was entering a forest of thought which stretched far beyond the limits not only of the religion, but of the science and reason of an epoch. It was an expedition as adventurous as that of Vasco, and like him it doubled the Cape of Storms. Having once put out, there was no further port of call, one was at the mercy of the winds and sea currents, one had said farewell to land, one's country was on or under the ocean.

A Latin catholic, who has believed what he believes no longer, never casts anchor in the waters of Doubt, he never stops, like those who “*protest*”, or who did “*protest*”—a

---

## THE COMBAT

---

very long time ago!—among the Germans and Saxons He goes to the bottom, and there is no bottom He does not build for himself, below water, like the "Reformers" (the well-named, who only reject by halves!) or like the metaphysicians of pure and practical Nordic Reason, a wooden platform suspended over the abyss He is alone and naked, and he swims He has only his limbs to uphold him He knows the hour will come when he must sink But he will not beg for succour

Juhen had flung himself into harsh, disillusioned reason, which accepts no compromise Like many who have bowed down too low to faith and the collection of restraints imposed by Society, he cherished towards both a resentment that went beyond the limits of strict justice He was not incapable of recognizing this, but he was incapable of renouncing that revenge He styled himself, bitterly, "*Juhen the Apostate*" And in that longing for reprisals, which soon became apparent in his writings, there was chastisement of himself—of the man he had been

It was first perceived between the lines of his *Philosophical Essays*, religion felt itself attacked It said so too loudly, it showed the blows had struck home, he redoubled them And though, after a few bitter engagements, it was found prudent to retire and keep silence (with marvellous unanimity, the whole right-minded Press never breathed another word about Juhen's publications), the rupture was definitive, and greetings exchanged with old acquaintances carried no illusion "*General mobilization is not war*", as the augurs say, but they do not look at each other and laugh war is coming, war is there, it awaits the hour

Then came the other War—the real War of 1914 In it all the accumulated pre-War passions found a broth-culture in which to proliferate Hatred of the outside enemy was not the only enmity craving satisfaction And how much more clearly suspicion, rancour and concealed hates, had seen (it is

usual) than friends ! They had perhaps seen more clearly than Julien himself For he had not yet realized the spirit of revolution that lay within him In the monotonous rumbling of motor buses that go snorting between the two rows of grey façades, bordering the street of every day, soliloquizing revolt grows drowsy, like a painful throbbing of the gums There is nothing to bite Delusive calm ! Julien knew that his disillusioned criticism had pierced beyond the first crust of his defunct faith, to the rotten shell of Society, it lay with him to dig the point in deeper, and lay bare the purulent abscess He did not do so He put off the moment of proving that the whole social order and its moral pillars were condemned He would have been forced to seek another dwelling, and forty years of home life had always made him think with terror of moving Yet he knew that notice had been given to leave the old lodging But he waited, with fatalism, for the end of the term, when he would have to move out And in that caravansaray of the past, there was still a great bazaar, the key of which he could not make up his mind to return He even avoided going to look at it, he had closed the doors and shutters upon the dust of centuries, it was not prudent to let in the daylight, and to sweep That great bazaar was the Country To the French before 1914, it was the only undisputed God All the other gods were subject to the common law of life death, in gross and in detail, old age, illness, the worm that gnaws the altars No unassailable god was left save Her alone For believers in religions, as for "free-thinkers" And still more so for the latter For away from Her, these poor people had nowhere to set their feet That pathetic and pitiful (in both senses of the word pity) cry of anguish, of the grand-master of the lay university, old Lavis

*" But if you take away my Country, what shall I have left ?  
What reason should I have for my existence ? "*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

Those old men, shut in, until the last day, by the harmonious but so narrow horizon of their hills ! They must have this land with all its dead, fifteen centuries of dead, under their heels ! Shake their "country" and it was as if the earth began to quake, all those who have been in an earthquake know the inexpressible, unique agony which seizes upon all the living the stable point, the only one upon which man has built, is withdrawn, there is nothing left      Julien, being an ultra-sensitive seismograph, perceived beforehand the warning rumbles under the earth, and the obscure distress of the soul which is about to lose its support      So much the more he turned away his eyes      He stood there, speechless, inhibited, and he took care not to touch the last remaining idol—But some of those whom he had deserted, priests well used to reading consciences, his old spiritual director, a shrewd old man with a large, thin-lipped mouth, like Voltaire's (but the eyes had no room for irony, they got into the house by ruse or burglary), had very soon seen, from the beginning of his revolt, that the rebel would not have the prudence to distinguish between *fas* and *nefas*, and that he would attack the great Fetish, and with their arms crossed in their long sleeves, they waited patiently, on the watch for the catastrophe      Less knowing were those laymen who took Julien for a dependable free-thinker who had only betrayed the sacristy for the profit of the lodge, and had enlisted himself in the service of reason, traditionalist, nationalist, *bourgeoise*, lay and obligatory and they had opened the doors of the College de France to him, together with those of the Academy of Moral and Political Science, while awaiting the other, the only one that counts, the Immortal      for some of the great electors within had cast their choice upon him; and his old master, whose touching and puerile exclamation we have just quoted, had told him that in two or three years his election was assured, he was making it his personal concern      For some unknown reason, the old man had a tender affection for Julien, he had seen him as a

child in his class, then on the benches of the Faculty, and without troubling to penetrate his thoughts, he had grown attached to the face whose youthful gravity and loyalty made an agreeable resting-place for his eyes while he was lecturing, between the two pairs of eyes, smiling at each other, there had arisen, in the course of years, a silent relationship, as of father and son. The old man was convinced that he had found a spiritual heir in Julien. And Julien, grateful and respectful, had never asked himself clearly whether he answered to his master's expectation.

When the War came and the intellectuals (the leading members of the University) of their own accord enrolled themselves in the service of their country, the old herald of official intelligence, the Maréchal of the University naturally entrusted his favourite with a leading part on the staff of the new Armée was organizing Intelligence, militarized for the first time, and requisitioned in the factories of intellectual munitions and cannon. History, science, eloquence, everything was useful—He would have been better advised to leave Julien in the shade, he would not have attempted to come forward, and he would probably have avoided discussing the conclusions which his elders, his peers and colleagues would have made him read and sign. But to ask him to control them, to share in the secrets of their fabrication! What imprudence! They were in good faith—in their fashion. These worthy men were so full of national passions, and the conviction that these were identified with the truth, that when the latter seemed to contradict them they did not hesitate to silence it, or to make it say what they liked. It only meant stretching its limbs a little when firmly tied to the rack. (It is not for nothing that the Sorbonne counts among its ancestors men of art and science who put to the "question" the bodies of those from whom they wished to extort the truth!) Julien was no good at the trade. He listened to the voice of truth and he did not know what "to question" meant. He naïvely reported from his study of

---

## THE COMBAT

---

German documents exactly what the text contained Discussion arose, and as it brought about comparison with the very different results of his colleagues, their opposition was revealed. It was clear, sudden and brutal. When an intellectual is irritated by being imprudently touched in a sensitive spot, he does not see red but white. (In fire, one knows, it is a more intense degree.) Julien went white to the lips as he listened to the transcriptions of one of his colleagues, he brought the flat of his hand down on the table, and cried

"But, it's a lie!"

What a hue and cry! The man he had insulted had hitherto been a loved and esteemed friend, a great professor, equally respected for his science and the integrity of his character. Julien apologized on the spot, and tried confusedly to explain his judgment, and make it more acceptable. But the mark of the blow remained on the face that had received it, and the eyes now burned with inextinguishable hatred. Never has an intellectual forgiven a colleague for seeing in him what he refuses to see in himself, for now, whatever he may do, he knows that what he refuses to see is *there*. Julien, more full of consternation than he whom he had just fatally wounded, kept repeating to himself on the way home

"And he is honest!"

Julien knew he was, he would have gone to the stake on it. That great savant. A life of disinterestedness. And the cult of truth. He laughed bitterly.

"The truth of honest men!"

It was a collapse to him. He felt the effects of his puritan education. The most puritan are often those who break with religion. When they think they do so for love of liberty, it is love of purity that urges them, the passion for pure truth, without compromise. He had thought to find it outside religion, among the followers of free reason. It was not there either. And Julien, pushing aside with feverish hands his regard which had hitherto protected the "honest men"

around him, began to examine things thoroughly. During those days he buried many of his fellows. But he had not the courage to deliver their funeral orations. He had so greatly honoured them that their failure was his own.

Most painful of all was the rupture with his old master, for it took place quietly, like the death of a father in his bed, when the dying man looks silently upon his son with poignant reproach. The old man, showing no anger, refused to read the memoir Julien had brought him. For Julien, put upon the track against his will, could no longer prevent himself from seeking the truth, and brought back the game to his master. The old man said:

"No, I will not, it's useless."

And laying his large hand, swollen by age, on Julien's

"My friend, you grieve me. Reflect! you are ruining yourself. You are failing in all that we expect of you in our common duty."

Julien stiffened.

"The common duty, common to us, men of science, is to serve truth, at any price. You taught me that yourself."

The old man shook his heavy head, and a flame shone in his bloodshot eyes.

"Truth can never be separated from our country. The cause of both is one."

"So be it! Then let our country not go astray from truth!"

"The country first!" said the old man. "We are all at her service."

"All, but not—" The old man cut him short.

"Everything. All that we have. Without exception."

Both kept silence. The old man's flame had died down. He avoided looking at Julien. He was waiting for Julien to speak, for Julien to say the words he expected. As the silence was prolonged, he raised his great head, like a sick lion's, and his heavy eyelids which seemed a reminder of the coffin-lid, and his thick, moist glance sought Julien's with tenderness,

fear and entreaty Julien was overwhelmed, but he could say nothing else than

"I cannot give what does not belong to me, that to which I belong—truth"

He did not say it, why inflict one more useless wound?—But he did inflict it. The old man read the words he did not utter. The heavy eyelids fell, and the great head sank on his breast. After recovering his breath for a moment, the stricken patriarch rose painfully from his chair, propping himself with his fists on the table. Julien sprang forward to help him, but with the awkward gesture of a man suffering from ankylosis, the master waved him off, without looking at him. And without looking back, making the floor creak under his heavy footsteps, he went away with bowed head, and bent back. He had received a deathblow.

## XXVIII

To a man like Julien, the wound that one has inflicted on another is not the least painful. One cannot cure it as one's own, we grow new skin, it heals up, but we cannot grow new skin for others and their wounds pain us. But for a man like Julien that obsession cannot stop the implacable forward march of the mind. It moves on, over its wounded and its dead. Julien could no longer say to his mind

"Halt! And forget what you have seen"

He never forgot anything. It was an infirmity of his mind. He went on. He did not seek polemics, and his method was unobtrusive. He only wished to enlighten himself—he was in no hurry to enlighten others for he knew enough about them now to know that they did not want to be enlightened. But the mere thought of his presence beside them, his silent control contradicting them, the wordless judgment he was passing on them (for they could no longer ignore it) threw



them into a state of irritation, which his very reserve exasperated. A blind instinct urged them to force him out of it. The most provocative was the friend—the dead friend—the mortal enemy, whose cheek retained eternally the sting of his blow. Julien was not allowed to be silent. It is too easy not to speak, and to be free to think. They confronted him with a common declaration. He did not sign it. They insisted that he should say why. Julien had a horror of any public profession of faith. But he did not shirk his responsibility. He said why. He said it in terms so clear and precise that when it was said those who had imprudently forced it from him would have liked to ram it down his throat again. They had overreached themselves in their stupid passion. They had set a trap for the enemy, and found themselves caught in it. It might still have done no harm if they had but kept their fury behind closed doors. But the journalists got wind of it, and one of them managed to get a copy of the heretic's dangerous confession. The stupidity of the censorship did the rest: it allowed access to the powder magazine, in order to exalt the patriotic stigma which the high teaching body had inflicted upon the unworthiness of one of their members. The clumsy excision of several passages, neither more nor less audacious than the rest, stimulated the public imagination to seek worse audacities. Julien himself was surprised when he read his own article. His natural timidity made him ask himself

“But who? But who said that? Who made me say it?”

Then suddenly he was silent—Annette was reading over his shoulder. Julien got up and walked up and down his room two or three times. He sat down again. And he smiled.

“What woman wills. Come what come may.”

“She” had achieved her end. He had broken the leading-strings—even as “she” had broken them—of the old social order. And now, he was alone—alone with “her”,—but he was not so sentimental as not to know that “she” was but a shadow of his brain, and he felt the need of flesh, the living

body united to his, to struggle against this world of flesh. But he never even thought of seeking her. Too late! The game was lost. He was one of those stoics (I salute them, God bless them! but I do not envy their broth, let them lick their lips over it!) who are never afraid of defeat, but accept it, and do nothing to remedy it. Julien remained, proudly, in the desert of his home—which luckily was beginning to be enlivened by a child's turbulence. We shall meet her again. But she is still taken up—I will not say with her dolls, for she has no girlish tastes—but with her boy's games and playthings. Of course, being a "pacifist's" daughter, she thought of nothing but wounds and bumps, she is Georgette. She will be George. For the moment she only made her presence known by her din about the house. Not a week without some smash-up! Her mother bewailed herself like Rachel. Her father said nothing. He never scolded.

All outside his home had become a hostile void. Julien's academic career was cut short. The grand-electors of the Academy would be careful henceforward to admit accomplices only—ministers, *maréchals*, or intellectuals who, like themselves, had betrayed truth for the good cause. "For God, the Tsar and Country!" the device of Michael Strogoff. Julien's old master and patron did not answer his affectionate letters, and returned unread a pamphlet in which Julien, with moderation and respect for those who thought differently, objectively maintained (with documentary evidence) his thesis of shared responsibility for the War and the duty of intellectuals to work for speedy reconciliation. The sheltered combatants of *L'Action Française* who, at little risk, had constituted themselves the "defenders" of the morale of the stay-at-homes, organized several disturbances during his lectures at the *Collège de France*. Luckily, professional solidarity, even stronger than patriotic passion, defended him against the violators of the sacred enclosure, like those medieval sanctuaries within which criminals could not be arrested. He

kept his class. It was only closed for a few weeks. By that time he was forgotten. The Whipping Fathers of *L'Action Française* had found other victims.

Julien caused no further scandal. But the merit was not his. The censorship, now on the alert, would not pass a single line of his. Even his archaeological monographs were suspect. Nothing further could appear before the end of the War. As to accepting the offers made to him by political parties of the opposition, anxious to secure his name for their associations and meetings, which moreover were infrequent and tracked down, Julien still retained too much of his double pride as an intellectual and a *bourgeois*, to listen to them. It would take him many years to get rid of his starched dicky. Even when freed and unstiffened, he would always be more at his ease among his books than with the man in the street. But his mind was intrepid, nothing would ever make him turn from the path on which he had entered, and his body, without joy, but without complaint, would loyally follow the mind that led it, and if necessary, even to the barricades.

He had not reached that point between 1915 and 1919. He meditated in silence. The very void which had been made around him, gave him leisure. His intellectual solitude enriched and emboldened him. He learned to do without other people. And those others who, in trying to deprive him of air, taught him to seek it on the summits, were irritated at the disappointment which envenomed their hostility. They had hushed up the scandal in vain. The scandal was silent, but it lived.

Julien's stern and ardent meditation was fixed on men as well as on ideas. The life experiences which had wounded him, were a benefit to his mind. They threw light on human nature for him and lit up the windings of the labyrinth. He had got beyond book learning. From day to day, for years, he penetrated the catacombs of the soul, all the intercrossing byways of the subconscious which run over the hollow ground,

---

## THE COMBAT

---

beneath the feet of the spoken thought, the daily lie He explored them alone, without seeking much help from the candle of the great doctors of psycho-analysis He had his own lantern His religious atavism had put into his hand the key of a singular intuition, akin no less to animal instinct as to reasoned intelligence, but ordered and directed by the latter The result was a system of thought which, after long wandering underground, seeking an issue, pierced the crust of darkness, and rose in artesian fountains of images at the weakest points of the crust, marked by the engineer It became evident that the great waters of the depths, full of symbols, unaware of each other, like blind fish, belonged to a poet-philosopher But it was to take Julien a long time to find it out As he had little feeling for what is generally admired under the name of poetry, he thought himself shut out from that light, for which he felt no regret, and as to philosophy, since religious doubt had ruined his foundations, he imagined that there were no foundations, and he jeered at the vain efforts of the mind to rebuild them He believed, in all good faith, that he believed in nothing Possibly ! He believed no more But he was creating And what is creating, if not believing ? Not with the head, perhaps, but with the loins The voice of being cries " Beget ! " The head will be obliged to follow It is a poor lord compared to the profound forces of the flesh When I say " the flesh ", I mean " the soul ", and its armies Julien had more of those energies in him that he knew We all have But they sleep, we are afraid to rouse them And the majority of those who are afraid, are right They would be incapable of directing them Let the country look out if those bands should be let loose ! But Julien governed his armies, while he followed them An intellectual of his stamp may launch his boat into the currents he keeps his hold on the tiller

This rare equilibrium of the critical mind and the intuition gave birth to *Dialogues of the People on the Aventine*, in which

---

## THE COMBAT

---

the people of the Soul, who had broken their bonds with the city, held tumultuous deliberations, and this time the man who pleaded the cause of the Stomach did not get the last word—he who would eat, let him work! “Show your hands! Intellectuals, savants, artists, writers, give an account of yourselves! What have you done in the last hundred years that you have been kings—or lackeys—of opinion?” It was a parade *a la* Daumier. All the heroes of the inkpot on the stage! But the real drama was in the soul of the spectator, who turned away in scorn—the people, camped without the city, round their great watch-fires in the night, watching the red smoke rising to the gulf of heaven, where the crackling stars are but sparks. The mind, without a guide, was making its Revolution in the hour when the Revolution was being made by the fists of nations in the heart of Europe. But the mind was unaware of events, and did nothing to make itself known. Julien did not publish his meditations. Even later, when the state of war and the censorship having come to an end, he could easily have found a publisher, he kept them in manuscript, it was repugnant to him to bring them into the open. Perhaps because then he would have been obliged to see himself there too, in broad daylight. And from the moment when light from without had entered his house, he would no longer be able to shut his door. An end to shadow! Shadow was done with. But there lingered complacently the twilight dear to men of thought. An end to the Rembrandt-*esque* penumbra, where from the invisible sun, shunned by too sensitive eyes, soft orange reflections light up the background of the room. The sun is coming in. Action is there.

Julien put off the moment of opening the door to the visitor, as long as possible.

So in the period following the War, he contented himself with publishing his great works on the history of science. He thought them objective. But his robust personality, fed by virile solitude, whose bow had been strung by years of compression,

did not perceive the brazen arrows which he aimed in every chapter against the falsehoods of the mind of his time, and of all times. As he had been imbued with them himself, he was aiming at himself. Who, then, was aiming? Himself. The new Julien, the new man, bleeding from his effort to set himself free. And it was a whole intellectual epoch, a whole age of the society now drawing to its end, which received the dart, and showed it.

It showed it as little as possible, so as not to call public attention to the archer. And youth, having no time to look for thought in the depths of bulky volumes, built like cathedrals, with the buttresses showing (I mean the support of their monumental documentation), passed by, without looking. Besides, if they had attempted to look, would they have understood? Would they have accepted? In the first post-War years, the great generation of heroes of the mind who, like Spitteler and Thomas Hardy, had reconciled themselves to proud solitude and heroic pessimism with valiant eyes, staring tragic reality in the face, with no hope of transforming it, suffered resentful discredit. Switzerland, so poor in genius, was persistent in almost malignant sarcasm against the poet of *Olympian Spring*. Stockholm, so lavish with the Nobel prize, never deigned to bestow it on Thomas Hardy. There was a grudge against these men for their virile detachment, which "dwelt serene" in implacable truth. They were accused of a selfishness, which contented itself with a bad world, devoid of hope, and which, having succeeded in installing their life and glory in it, made no effort to remedy it. It was not realized that these grand old men had been haunted, nearly all their lives, by a sense of wounded justice, that they had had to harden themselves against sorrow, and that if they had entrenched themselves, like Spitteler, in an armour of indifference and lordly irony, it was after the fashion of Timon of Athens, betrayed in his love for humanity. "Durchaus"!

"In spite of all!" The word of Prometheus and Heracles,

who have no faith in the men for whom they are about to sacrifice themselves!

Julien had been nourished by this bitter substance, by the Nietzschean pessimism of old lions, who laugh. But he belonged to an intermediate generation, between these great solitaires of thought who do not act, and post-War youth who would act before thinking—to fill up the gulf—(They were not of a stature to fill it up! Their bodies and souls were to be broken in it )

Julien, like them, had the abysmal vision of Existence, the human gulf. But that vision did not strike him in growing youth, when the tender body and mind are still unformed. His bones were hardened now, he was not broken. He did not flinch. He was able to look the Nothingness of the dark adventure in the eyes. And he illuminated that darkness with the lightning of the mind that creates *its* truth, *its* beauty, and *its* goodness. He felt the powerful effects of these, and wrapped himself in them, with love, without losing for a moment the clear consciousness of the abyss over which he was suspended with all that he loved.

That he loved? What did he love? He was alone, and disillusioned about men, who kept him and whom he kept at a distance. Yes, the present—that which is dying, and will be dead to-morrow! It was not for these condemned, these men of the present, that he thought, lived and created. But he who creates by flesh or by mind (it is all the same!) bears the men of the future in his loins. How should he not love them? He projects them into the darkness. It is they who will fill up the abyss.

This great solitary who so intrepidly engendered his thought, was making the future, without dreaming of it, without knowing it, he was a worker in the work-yard of the men and nations of the world who at that moment were labouring to build a new order, a new world. And later, when he became aware of it—after outside events had forced an entrance into his study

—he found himself enlisted in the army of the Revolution It was then for ten years that this " Revolutionary without knowing it " had been firing his brazen arrows for it against the mind of the enemy

And when he was but half aware of it, Annette, convalescent, reading his books in bed, discovered it at the first glance And joy inundated the heart in her bosom, whose old love, still young, swelled her breasts She also, had engendered ! him, who loved her Her Julien The Archer

## XXIX

So now the two old friends were very near each other But it was to be feared that their return to each other would never have come about, but for two young hands that pushed them by the shoulders —" Forward ! forward ! " solid hands, expert at ball throwing

The good genius, the young sprite who brought together the two old lovers, separated by the briers of twenty years, in the forest of an autumn's Night Dream, resembled Puck in nothing but gaiety She was agile, certainly, and her supple body could bend backwards till she touched her heels with her hands, standing But she did not pass unperceived, and if the earth could speak, it would have cried out under her feet What they held beneath their soles, they held, every step said " Mine ! The earth is mine ! Life belongs to me ! " And that " me " was a tall, robust girl, like a boy, with a round, close-cropped head, flat bust, broad shoulders, slight hips, muscular arms, long thighs, white calves and arched feet She was Julien's daughter, Georgette by name But she was George a boy And quite ready to step upon the dragon She would have laughed heartily to see the great lizard wriggling under her heel Laugh, she had known how to do that ever since she came into the world God knows where she had



learned it ! Juhen's gloomy household, father, mother and grandmother had been dumbfounded when it first heard it, and even now, though he had been blessed with her for twenty years, Julien felt the same wonder at it, every minute, ashamed of himself and anxious

" If the miracle should cease ! "

For miracle it was. He had so little turn for laughter. He laughed so badly ! And he felt as he heard it that it was so beautiful, so good ! Who had given him such a gift ? He told himself that he did not deserve it. And indeed he did not, for tormenting himself with this idea of merit and demerit ! As if the thrush thought of that ! It finds that grapes are good. George found life good. " Pilfer ! " She pilfered.

Who would have told Juhen's generation that, on the field of ruin where, moaning, they gathered up the fragments of their broken bowl, the new brood would be able to find a vineyard ? None of the elders had shown her the way. She walked alone. One had only to look at George walking, with her bust slightly inclined like a runner, elbows to sides, hands forward, ready to seize, mouth half open, and bosom rising and falling with her rhythmic breath, very light eyes in a fair sunburnt face, they missed nothing by the way, and within nothing troubled her. Well endowed in body and mind, she had developed vigorously, leisurely, without scruples, and without excess. Happily for her, she had been born encased in an amazing impermeability to the atmosphere of the house. Her faculty of not hearing lamentations and remonstrances had been the despair of her mother, it was not bad will, it was much worse, indifference pure and simple. She did not hear what bored her. This physical insensibility did not exclude an expansive heart. When her mother, having talked and talked, asked her

" Do you understand ? What did I say ? "

George laughed in her face, and embraced her so impetuously that the good woman had no further courage to scold,

## THE COMBAT

but she had no doubt that she had wasted her time once more. If, at least, she could have understood what was going on inside the girl! But it was all a secret chamber to her, she could not cross the threshold. She did not know what George thought about what was nearest her heart—religion. George made no objection to going to Mass with her mother, saying her prayers, and even, if it was insisted on, to going periodically to wash her linen in the confessional. She went, and returned, with the same careless good humour as from her college, or tennis, her sins did not weigh heavily upon her! But what did she think? What did she think of what she read in her missal, of the Gospel, of Jesus Christ and the Virgin, of the Church, and of God, and even of the after-death and the resurrection? It was impossible to find out!—The truth is that she thought nothing about them. They did not interest her.

"Oh! Good Lord, yes, she had thought, of course, like everyone else, that we must die. But it was a long way off! And we only die once. Whereas we live a hundred thousand times, at every minute of the day. There is no time to bother about the end. What would be the use? What do we know about it? Yes, of course, there is the Church that tells you this. And there are others who tell you that. As for me, let it be this and that. It is not my business to discuss what I know nothing about. I have too many other interesting things to do. Think for me about those things, if you like! And above all don't worry yourself about me! I shall always be able to find a way out!"

She did not say this. Perhaps she did not express it clearly to herself. But it could be read in her magnificent unconcern. And the mother did not lack reasons for fresh torments. She revelled in them. (All hungers must have bread. Some prefer the bread of tears. George did not grudge it them.)

Perhaps it was lucky for both that the mother departed to what she thought the better world before her daughter had turned fifteen. Of course George said and thought

" My poor mother ! "

And she wept floods she could, just like anyone else ! On that occasion she indulged in one of those big childish griefs, when the nose gets swollen, and eyes are bunged up with crying. But—it was not her fault—when the shower was over, and the eyes dried, it was finer than before, and " poor mother " did not take up much room in the house. Neither father nor daughter admitted it, but they were much more at their ease.

However far Julien might be from knowing his daughter's mind—undiscovered country !—he felt an incomprehensible indulgence for her, especially since the child, left solely to his protection, had grown into a woman. He had not checked her development in any way, he allowed her a freedom which would have driven her mother mad. George came in and went out as she liked, planned her days as she pleased, told him about them, or not, as she chose. She could make what she would of her life. Julien asked nothing of her, but to see that the house was well kept, and to be punctual at meals, and for the rest to know that he trusted her. She knew it, and to her it was the most effective discipline. At moments when the brain reels (there are always such moments in a girl's life), George held on to herself thinking

" There are two of us he and I "

Since he trusted her ! If he had put a veto on anything she would probably have stepped over it, for fun. And yet the system of paternal non-resistance could not have sufficed to save her ! She might just as well have said

" What if I did taste it ? It would do him no harm, and it would do me good "

But she did not want to taste it. Love was the least of her cares. Yet she was a fine girl, quite complete. Nothing was wanting in her. What, then ? She did not desire men. And the desire for men seemed to her rather grotesque. She did not fail through ignorance. She had read—and how

---

## THE COMBAT

---

much!—in Nature's great book She was going through her P C N And God knows what she had seen and heard! But it was like water on a duck's back The most risky sights and conversations went "splash" in her stream and disappeared, leaving no trace Her hearty big boy laugh spoilt the nerve of the most daring, they were disarmed and laughed with her They treated her as a comrade and contented themselves with chaffing the "invulnerable" She was the first to laugh at herself But she did not try to change

The passion for sport had taken the place of other passions She put the best of herself into it All joys in one joy of the game, joy of action, joy of self-mastery, joy of pride and joy of disinterested passion, intoxication of the blood and clearness of mind, plenitude of energies and the paroxysm when life only hangs by a thread "And the thread is good, life bounds, air and earth are mine "

Without telling her father (he only heard of it after it was known to all Paris), she went into regular training She said to herself

"I will do as well as the rest, I will do better"

For on seeing them going round the track, her young blood ran swifter, she pawed the ground, she was sure of her lungs and her thighs And she ran in the stadium and beat the "three hundred yards" record, she held it sturdily for several months She had had her hour of Olympian glory among the anachronistic youth who, all unknowingly, were reviving ancient Greece under the tip of the black wing of chaos spreading over the sky of Europe She was worth seeing in the moment of victory, dead beat, panting, shiny, smelling of sweat, hair plastered down, round black-encircled eyes, drawn features, rather haggard, frankly ugly, indifferent to beauty—and more beautiful than beauty, she was radiant

"I have *had* it!"

What? That record? success

Ah! much more than a stadium

"I have *had* my fill! I have *had* myself! " What possession can equal that? What does one want with that of lovers? Here is pure complete joy! Not a grain could be added to it Yes, it does not last Nothing lasts But one has had it The glow of it remains under one's skin What on earth could possibly be more solid?

There were days when a secret voice whispered to her, as she met little feet toddling in a garden, and a little nose in the air, that was not always wiped

"There is the child "

The amazon had not cut off her breasts The woman's heart remembered She smiled at the toddler

"Yes, that would be good, too—if it were not for the man "

But there was the man "Blow! " She put the child out of her thoughts One can't have everything! What she had was enough for her

## XXX

And Julien, who from out the dim light like that of an old morose Faust in his alchemist's study, contemplated her unawares and admired in bewilderment the free girl he had begotten, trembled every day lest she should leave him, and reassured himself every day, seeing her content, and without anxiety or desires He said to himself

"How does she do it? How did she manage to be my issue? "

And an inner voice replied

"You know quite well! You recognize *her* "

Whom?—Her who had set a seal upon his life, her whom his life had rejected But, God be praised! she had been the stronger She had never left his house She had gradually penetrated his mind She had done more She had penetrated into his granary Julien tried to persuade himself that

---

## THE COMBAT

---

this living seed which had sprung from him, came from her. He pretended to recognize her. He recognized certain details imperceptible to other eyes, a downy shadow at the corner of the lips, the carriage of the neck, the pronunciation of certain consonants, remarks she had made, and God knows what else! He said to himself

“ Good God ! Annette ”

Illusion, no doubt. His vision, impregnated with her, projected her on to things. But, after all, if his mind was impregnated by her, why should his daughter not be so likewise? What did it matter if he was the sport of an obsession! But it mattered a good deal to George's happiness. Though she had not the least suspicion of it, she owed her father's amazing indulgence and his tender respect for her liberty to it. She said to herself “ I am lucky ! ” She did not know whom she had to thank for it.

In the end she met it one day, the invisible ghost that stole about the house! She had surely brushed against it often, on the threshold of her father's room, or met it in his eyes, from the days of her early childhood. But she was so used to it that she never noticed it. The ghost had to speak. It did speak.

Julien had gone to London for a Congress. He was to be away for a fortnight. George took advantage of this to have a dust hunt in the holy of holies, his work-room. Like all real workers, he never allowed anyone to touch it. He claimed to keep it in order himself. And, of course, to other eyes than his own his order was the most inextricable disorder. George, who was the born enemy of confusion, had been on the watch for a long time for the chance to work her will. She seized the moment when the master was away. Wouldn't he make a song and dance when he got back! Well, let him.

“ Sing away, Dad ! ”

She laughed, in anticipation, like a naughty girl.

"Protest, sacred papers!" (She gathered them in armfuls and flung them on the floor) "I am the master here"

She went at it with a will, sweeping away bundles, juggling with cardboard boxes, so that one of them, opening its jaws to protest, vomited forth, as in the fairy tale, the flood of words piled up within letters and letters, clumsily tied up, which were scattered all over the room. What were they?

George crouched on the floor to pick them up, laughing more than ever

"Sakes alive! If he sees that I have touched them!"

What shall I do now to put them back in the same order as he had arranged them? The only way is to read them to see the date of each letter. Just the heading. It won't take long. Father's correspondence must be deadly boring! Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

The first lines of the first letter promised anything but boredom. And the string, with the clumsy knot still tied, which had let the papers escape, it was, it had once been, a ribbon

"Oh, I say, Dad!"

She did not ask herself whether she was going to read them, as one decently should when one has a shred of old-time reserve left. Why certainly, she was going to read them! This promised to be very interesting. She settled herself comfortably on the floor with legs crossed, almost under the table, among the scattered letters. And she dipped haphazard into the heap. No fear of being disturbed. She was alone in the flat. "If anyone rings, I'll let them ring." The open window. Blackbirds in the garden outside. The June sunshine flowed round her, caressing the old brass of the bureau above her head. But she was in a shady arbour, and the soul-creeper rising from the letters twined round her fingers, with the scent of the flowering jasmine in the garden. She was humming. She was comfortable.

Did she not realize her misdemeanour? Oh! per-

---

## THE COMBAT

---

fectly! She realized it, and it amused her. She was past respecting conventional morality. She knew that it must not be openly defied, she was bold and had good sense. But, on the sly? "Shut up, old bean!" She was like Kitchener. Once east of Suez, different morality! "I have my own." And (it was certainly lucky) hers was good and wholesome, perhaps better than that which was left in the anchorage, on the other side of the canal. She sincerely loved her father. Perhaps not, surely not! as girls used to love their fathers. The dose of respect has mightily decreased. No trace of fear now. And the veneer of that ancient veneration is deucedly chipped. But has affection lost by it? I should say on the contrary. Provided, of course, that he, the man, has deserved it.

"For why should I be bound to love him if he had done nothing more than beget me? Between ourselves, Dad, for all the trouble that gave you! To bring me up, yes. That's a different matter. Well, now it is for me to judge. So much the worse for you, if you did not want, or did not know, what was my welfare, and my right! You did want and you did know, my old man, and your merit is the greater that your daughter was not an easy goat to keep. I have trampled over all your flower-beds of prejudices! I do not forget it. I forget nothing. And if anyone ever dared to touch you, he would have me to reckon with. We are allies. But between ourselves, old pal, I have a perfect right to laugh at you, and to poke my nose into your papers. Yes, you would not admit it, you belong to the good old days. But I belong to mine. Enough! I'll read. You will know nothing about it. One mustn't hurt children's feelings."

She lit a cigarette.

"Ah! Take care! I mustn't set fire to the whole show."

To read better she sucked silently for a moment the juice of the letter, and the end of her cigarette.



"No! What passion! Is it possible that my old father was ever loved like that!"

The cigarette burned, burned, and went out. George forgot she was holding it, till it burnt the tips of her fingers. She did not think of lighting others. She stretched herself out full length on her stomach, with her elbows on the floor, to read better. She read, and read. What a torrent! It seemed to her that she was bathing her stomach in it. She read without judging, without trying to form an opinion, without understanding very well. It was such a different world to her! But to her what emerged from every line, from every ripple of the current, was a woman, a loving, sorrowful woman, but virile in her lament and ardour, who dominated the other—"that man"—from the height of her proud soul, who led him by the hand, comforting him with her tender strength, sacrificing herself, and in the end consoling him for sacrificing her. And he, the man, cut a melancholy and sorry figure beside her, as one who had seen happiness pass by, and had not had the strength to seize it, and who was so conscious of having ruined himself by refusing it that he had written in his heavy hand, outside the packet of letters

*"My slain happiness"*

George only read this cry as she was trying to gather up the scattered letters.

She stopped collecting them. She lay down on her back with hands clasped behind her head. She was looking at a red rose hanging to the side of the window, stirred by a stormy wind. And all round her, on the floor, that silent symphony of love.

Thirty years before another woman, another girl, had thus rifled her father's love secrets.<sup>1</sup> Now avenging fate delivered her up in her turn. But her father was then dead. George's father was alive. And the embers she had stirred were still

<sup>1</sup> *Annette and Sylvie*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

burning They burned George's fingers that had touched them

George lay dreaming, drifting on unknown seas Odours were wafted to her from the Polynesian Isles which she saw rising from the emerald sea, rows of madrepores and mangroves, with a fringe of foam These archipelagos were unknown ground to her But their perfume penetrated her all the more intensely And her footsteps freed the spring of that strange emotion we have all experienced, at the shock of certain meetings, in places where we have never before set foot

"I have been here before "

She? She had been here? How could she have been?

She had never loved And at that very moment she was free and far from love And yet the love of this stranger rose from her heart like a well-known peal of distant bells All this old story was a tale she had heard told long ago, when half asleep, and had forgotten It seemed to her, after she had read it, that she could have related every episode before she had turned the page And this woman-figure, enigmatic and near to her at one and the same time, she did not feel her sorrow, but felt her impulses—not the melody, love or elegy—but the rhythm, the strength, the fountain spring, the blood She could have sworn that she had seen her More! Known her More! What more?

George sat up so suddenly that she knocked her head under the table

"More! They are mine"

But the blow roused her She rubbed her head

"Gracious! I'm mad I've forgotten to have lunch"

She had a hearty appetite To forget lunch she must indeed have lost her bearings She recovered them at once But while she was swallowing belated mouthfuls, she kept upon the scent she had just picked up Though she kept saying

"It's idiotic"

She said to herself

"He loved her before I was born"

And God knows what her feminine imagination stuffed with romanticized science would have proceeded to build up upon that foundation. Before they were put away the poor letters were to be read and studied several times. Afterwards, George could have discussed the facts and dates with her father. If she did not, she came very near it one evening, she bit her tongue, she would have liked to know. Those damned conventions! Why can't such subjects be simply discussed? The subjects would not have stopped her. But she could not, in decency, tell him how she had got possession of his secrets. And yet how amusing it was, and touching!

"The poor man sitting there, at the other side of the table, thinking that he is alone in the world with his mysteries, unaware that I know them, that I see him naked, with his sorrow, his love, his weakness, and his wounds. And I am judging him. I do judge you. You *have* made some blunders! You were not very bright. Ah! I only love you all the more!"

She went and kissed him

"Poor old Dad!"

He did not understand

She set out upon the chase. She had made up her mind to find Annette. But she could not hope that her father would put her on the track. And discovery was not easy. The name of Madame Rivière was not to be found in year-books. She might be dead, or married. It took time to get information.

George picked up the scent at last—Assia first, then Marc, whose youthful notoriety was spreading. She went to the bookshop two or three times, but she did not meet Annette. And she could not pluck up courage to go and knock at her

door So near the threshold, she drew back She tried in vain to be bold and hustle things, she was strangely shy If she saw Annette, what would she say to her? So embarrassing, a *tête-à-tête* with such an intimate stranger, such a known unknown, whose secrets she had impudently broken into! Such an Annette as George had imagined to herself would never forgive it, if she knew And she would know at the very first words George felt that she would betray herself directly she met her eyes She would lose all her nerve beforehand, and she would stand there open-mouthed, cut short, and blushing! Then to get out of her embarrassment, like all shy people, she would become abrupt and clumsily let out, as if in defiance, all the confession she was holding back Annette's eyes would become icy, at once, and she would shut the half-open door of confidence And the ditch would become more impassable than ever George had not the courage to attempt it Yet she did not give up her project But she waited some opportunity or other which would help her, or force her to dare The opportunity must come It would come!

It does not come to the majority of those who wait because they wait passively But George's waiting was, like herself, always active and ready for action She did not sleep, she watched In short, when opportunity is lacking, it is much less because it has not come than because one has not seen it coming, and seized it on the wing, as it passed No danger that a George would let it pass! A look, a leap, and she will catch it, like a tennis ball

## XXXI

Who sent the ball this time?	A stranger	A partner from
Italy	He also had met Annette by chance	But it was not

chance alone, it was life's destiny, it was a kinship of mind that had brought him into touch with Julien, and which, under George's impulsion, was to make him the messenger to open the door between the two old friends

Annette was far from expecting him ! That morning she was sitting tired out, with aching legs, in a corner of her room, which she was cleaning out. She had no servant, only a daily woman, who came for a few hours to do the heavy work. She was alone, rather forsaken by her children, who having no more troubles to bring her, kept their pleasures and activity to themselves (Activity shared by two is the greatest pleasure !). She had not the bad taste to complain. It is a mother's lot ! When children are contented, they put her out of their thoughts, like a good housekeeper. She has done her work, and goes away. Annette smiled. But her loins were aching. She was no longer young. And she had borne more than her share of her own worries and those of others. She sat there languidly with her weariness and her thoughts, holding the duster with which she had been rubbing the furniture. The window was wide open on to the street. The cold air chilled her shoulders. But she noticed it no more than the noises of the street. She was thinking. She was thinking that it is very good to sustain those whom we love. But it would be very good to be sustained a little too, now and then ! And it was a rare luxury. She did not blame anyone. People can only give what they have got. And every one of the men she had known had only just enough for his own needs. With affectionate irony, she saw all those who had drunk her milk passing before her eyes. They filed past, in no order, and their reappearance was often unexpected, among known and familiar faces, others arose which she had thought forgotten, and among them faces scarcely seen for a day, but whose real features showed themselves (perhaps by contrast) for the first time, in full light. And by one of those mysterious flashes which seem like a ray projected by the

coming moment, a face rose from the gulf of the past, a face of which Annette said

"That one took nothing from me He gave"

She was surprised that she should have so forgotten him, that, for a moment, she could not even remember his name

And just at that moment the door of her room was thrown open, and the untrained servant girl, without any announcement, showed someone in

"It's a gentleman, Madame "

With a start Annette saw him whom she had just evoked, standing on the threshold an old-time, white-bearded face, a beautiful smile, and light eyes Though the meeting was so unexpected, she did not hesitate for a moment And the name she had been seeking immediately came to her lips She stretched out her hands to him And only after that did she feel ashamed of having been caught in her *neglige* of soul and toilet, but she laughed good-humouredly, when she found that she was still holding the duster He laughed with her, apologizing, and excusing the servant, whom she was scolding He had seen the warm frank flash of joy in her eyes that had welcomed him The same impulse drew him towards her Though he was almost an old man, his youthful eyes were twenty

Annette had met him seven years before in the train, going through the south of Italy She was returning from her stay in Rumania<sup>1</sup> Hardly recovered from an illness, and still feverish, she had an overwhelming longing to sleep But she felt that she was still in the jungle—the jungle full of reeds into which she had fled, sinking to her middle in the mud—the fever lands, the great Italian marshes which the train was passing through, reminded her of it, and she sat up, stiff, tense and shivering She struggled against sleep, it overcame her sometimes, and her head fell forward, but she woke

<sup>1</sup> *The Death of a World*

again with a start, and held up her head, looking distrustfully at her neighbours, with knitted brows. They were nearly all peasants, and little Italian *bourgeois*. She was travelling third class in a crowded middle compartment, at the stations still more passengers were piled into the already overcrowded carriage by main force, they sat upon the knees of the others, a woman stood swaying about, clutching a chance shoulder here and there, the men smoked, spitting between their legs. Annette squeezed herself into her corner, in disgust, not daring to move her feet. Above her head, a man stood with his elbows on the partition which separated the compartment from the next, half-way up. They were nearly all pale and hollow-cheeked, with a fortnight's beard, one old man had a ring in his hairy ear, they had feverish eyes with yellowish whites, some with beautiful bright pupils, like animals, a boy who was resting his chin on the partition of the next carriage, just opposite Annette, and a little girl sitting in the spit on the floor, never took their sharp eyes off her. Conversation went on between the three compartments, in a rough dialect, and now and then a *fiaschetto* was passed over, or a sour-smelling cheese. In her nightmare of fatigue, Annette felt like an animal of another species, shut up in a cage of strange disquieting beasts that sniffed at her and were gradually drawing in around her. She summoned all her strength in vain, she saw them awaiting the moment when she would sink exhausted, to fall upon her. She went under. Her heavy head fell against the wooden back of the carriage, and the upper part of her body slipped down. At that moment—she had not quite lost consciousness, but she had given up the struggle and abandoned herself to sleep—she felt gentle hands behind her, holding her by the shoulders and under the arms—and slipping a bag under her head. Her heavy eyelids opened for the last time, she just caught a glimpse beneath them of the man's eyes. He was leaning over the partition, like Rubens's man over the cross, holding up her body, and laying her down. It

---

## THE COMBAT

---

was like a lake in the mountains    A feeling of perfect security  
She let herself sink into sleep

When she emerged an hour later, the air was lighter round her. She saw that her neighbours, kind souls, had watched over her sleep. She found her cheek resting on a shawl which an old peasant woman had made into a pillow for her. And the little girl at her feet who was biting into an orange, held it out to her. Seeing her open her eyes, they all complimented her with jocular good-nature. And she answered with the same laughing friendliness, there was no more embarrassment between them. They were all of the same species. She knew whence had come the stroke of the wand the reverse of Circe's, which had changed the beasts into companions. The magician was behind her. She had no need to turn round and look at him. His grave musical voice cast a net over all these beings crowded together, it had made communion of sympathy and interests between them, conversation was general between the three compartments, and though he did not assert himself in the least, it gravitated round him. The looks of all the speakers nearly always converged upon him, and as they had to pass over Annette's head to reach him, they stopped on the way. Annette was included in the conversation. And as her ears gradually grew accustomed to their speech, she joined in, in halting Italian, which made them chuckle kindly. She was surprised to hear the man she could not see answer her in very pure, choice French. They continued their dialogue without her attempting to see him. He inquired discreetly where she had come from and where she was going and gave her directions for her journey. He did not talk about himself, and she asked no questions. The peasants addressed him as "*Signor Conte*". And she knew he was elderly. He had alluded to certain events that he had witnessed in those regions more than thirty years ago. He spoke with familiar courtesy. She liked to picture him to herself without seeing him. But she knew that he saw her, and she felt that she was



under his care It did not displease her , it was as if they had made a secret compact " You are taking care of me I trust you "

And it is most remarkable that her trust was justified in danger They were jolting along slowly, careless of the coming moment Suddenly there was a terrible shock, a clatter of iron, of broken glass and wood , the carriage cracked like a nut and fell to pieces Everything went down, amidst howls like those of slaughtered beasts Annette found herself beneath the ruins, on her back, caught between the shattered seats and trampled by the feet of the maddened herd (the companions had turned into animals again) And to put the finishing touch to the panic, the wreckage caught fire After vainly trying to free herself, Annette, paralyzed in all her limbs, abandoned herself to her fate She lay on her back, her head a little lower than her body, and she felt a warm fluid flowing from a cut above her chest , but she could not feel the wound In the pandemonium around her, she could see between a crack in the wreckage, a lovely piece of sky, from which the sun had just disappeared And she was amazingly calm She could hear the sinister sound of the fire gnawing its way and over her head, across the tender sky, the wind blew down the black smoke in which bits of burning wood exploded, like chestnuts among the embers and within a few yards of her imprisoned body, the noisy breath of the furnace blew against her cheeks She waited She was waiting for *him* to save her She had no reason to believe that he was still alive, or that he was thinking of her But she was sure And she was not in the least surprised when she heard his voice calling

" *Cara Francia*, are you there ? "

She answered

" Present, Friend ! "

He found her almost immediately, and she saw his anxious fraternal look through the crack He lost no time in exclamations In the twinkling of an eye, he had gathered a willing

band, and organized them, to set her free. It was dangerous work. The least false move might bring down upon her the heavy masses, held suspended by chance! And yet there was no time to spare. The tongue of fire was almost licking the woman's feet as she lay. She did not speak. She left it to them. But as they gradually got her shoulders free, she felt the wound more. And she thought she was going to faint. But she smiled trustfully at her rescuer who, with infinite precaution, was freeing her imprisoned head and pressing her temples between his hands, saying

"Courage! It is nearly over."

She said

"I am not afraid. I am in your hands." He was touched by such confidence.

"My brave child."

She lost consciousness with the pain. For a few minutes

She recovered it almost at once. They had got her safely out, and were carrying her away. She said

"No! I want to walk. I can."

Her friend said

"You are hurt."

She said

"There will be time to think of that. You must save the others first."

The broken carriage was a furnace. It was impossible even to go near it. The other carriages had resisted better, but the fire would reach them in their turn. The rescuers busied themselves with extricating those who were still caught in them. The greater number had fled, and rushed shrieking over the plain, like frightened poultry. Some were seen to stumble and fall, and lay yelling on the ground. In their panic, they never thought themselves far enough to be out of danger. Some were rallied, with great trouble. It was here that the *Signor conte* showed his calm authority. He did not shout. He did not excite himself. He walked quietly

in the midst of hysterical gesticulations, he took this or that man or woman by the elbow, he impressed his will upon them at once, their screams stuck in their throats, he said

“Come here, my good soul                      Now, my dear chap, keep your chest note for when you make your *debut* at the San Carlo                      With such lungs, at least blow the other way ! You’re blowing up the fire                      ”

They laughed    He did what he chose with them    In a little while they had finished digging out those who remained to be rescued    They lined up the wounded at some distance from the railway, in a ditch, sheltered by an embankment    The Count had a small surgical case, he busied himself hastily dressing the worst wounds    He looked round for the French-woman    He saw her, a few paces off, leaning against a twisted olive tree    She still felt within an inch of fainting, and was biting her lip to keep herself from going off    He left the others, and said

“Your turn ! ”

The dry plain all round her, no shelter, and all those eyes looking at her                      She said

“The fortune of war ! ”

She undid her dress    The blood stuck to the stuff    He ripped it with a penknife    Between the breast and right shoulder, a piece of wood from the broken carriage had made a gash    The blood ran as he tore away a strip of the chemise    She stood there with her arm raised    She looked like an Amazon in the battle    The indiscreet crowd naïvely expressed the appreciation of connoisseurs in fine figures and fine wounds    The *Signor conte* felt, washed, and rapidly dressed the wound with deft and delicate fingers    An old peasant woman was helping him    He asked

“Am I hurting you ? ”

Annette answered

“I have gone through worse !

Haven’t we, mother ? ”

(She was addressing the old woman) "Men are very proud of their war wounds We have had ours for a mighty long time! But we never think of boasting of them"

"In what battles?" asked the Count

"*Sì, signori!* Those in which you were calved"

The crowd laughed An old man said

"Bravo! And the minxes do not only make calves, they make horns too"

But Annette was showing off, to save herself from fainting She was speaking in a mist Her nurse was not taken in He said

"And now, lie down!"

She persisted

"Is there nothing I can do to help you?"

"There is nothing more to do but to wait for a relief train from Taranto"

They had a long time to wait It was still the period of post-War disorganization The victims of the accident camped on the plain The night was clear and cool They made great fires with the train wreckage Annette and the Count sat apart talking Far off, to their right, smoked the remains of the conflagration And from very far the murmur of the Tyrrhenian sea was borne to them on the wind The hours went by under the marvellous canopy of the Italian night sky, where the stars rolled suspended, like grains of gold, from a trellis, that might have been gathered with the hand The two chance companions exchanged affectionate compliments upon their mutual courage they had not the bad taste to express surprise at it But Annette attributed hers to the confidence with which the other had inspired her, and she asked the reason of the great calm which he spread around him, and which is so rare a benefit in life whence had he drawn it? Was it from this sky, which was so akin to him?

He answered, staring at the fire, and the flame and moving shadows cast a tragic tremor on his smile

---

## THE COMBAT

---

" I drew it from this earth, which swallowed up all that I loved "

Annette leaned towards him, in silence He continued, without looking at her

" Friend, this hard parched earth on which you are lying seems dead to you, like a planet grown cold Listen ! You will hear the hammer of the Cyclops You cannot hear ? Day and night I never cease scanning the iron rhythm And I hear Messina falling into ruins "

" Were you there ? " asked Annette

" With all my family My mother, my wife, my brother, my four children They are there still They lie beneath it "

Annette, shocked, took his hand He pressed it, and held it in his, in the calm night, calmly he told her of his life

We will tell it after him But we will do it less soberly Many of his personal traits were not revealed to Annette till long afterwards, little by little In this first account he only gave her the broad outline But we, little gods, who have the privilege of reading the destinies of our children, let us unfold the Book of their life !

### XXXII

He belonged to an old Sicilian family, Count Bruno Chiarenza An ancient name illustrious in the time of the Normans A few fine remains of great possessions, at the gates of Messina, on the heights of the town , not far from the ruins of Matagrifone, an old uncomfortable house, the façade giving on to a narrow street, but the entrance enriched by a Della Robbia bas-relief At the back a wood of orange trees in graded terraces descended to the sea Here the Chiarenzas had led for centuries a simple rustic life, with the noble traditions of a humanistic spirit, a little out of date, but redolent of the honey of Theocritus They rocked the slumber of their

glorious turbulence of olden times, in the tourneys of provincial philological and poetical academies bearing the names of heraldic monsters Lynx or Griffons. In these they expended a good deal of idle ingenuity and real Græco-Latin erudition, which they transmitted from father to son, and sometimes from father to daughter. Since Pythagoras Great Greece has admitted women to equal rights of the mind.

Count Bruno, while amusing himself, had acquired a well-deserved reputation in academic Hellenism. While cultivating his orange trees and sharing with a brother, his deputy, the produce of a solfatara, he published epigraphic memoirs in fine style, and an Orphic anthology. He even poetized on his own account, both in Greek and Italian. He had reached the age of forty, ignorant of life's hardships. Surrounded by affection, and affectionate himself, he had received from his intelligent parents comfortable means and a taste for disinterested work, which is an added pleasure, and the indulgent optimism which costs nothing to those who have only had to do with the smiling face of "*the Mother*". These "*belle-lettrist*" gentlemen shut out of their garden the echo of the bestial struggles which in Bruno's childhood strained the spines of their neighbours, Calabria and Basilicata, the social warfare between the *galantuomini* and *cafoni*—and the dreadful poverty. Count Bruno had never even taken the trouble to pay one visit to the solfatara, the revenues of which enabled him to write down his "golden verses", or those of Pythagoras. His brother, who seldom went there, had amiably prevented him, with a brief allusion to the dust, misery, and necrosis, he sincerely deplored them. They were a necessary evil, but it was not necessary for the Counts Chiarenza to go there and sadden their light eyes in which the nymph Galatea, their neighbour of mythological fable, surveyed herself. Every man to his trade. theirs was to realize beauty, by the pen, and (were they not worthy of it?) by their lives.

Count Bruno was well endowed for such a mission. His beautiful hands, deft and nonchalant, brushed shadows from his path without effort. Amiable, charming, and easily charmed, he had not lacked *amours*, which, thanks to his charming nature, and his superficial but spontaneous kindness, he had been able to enjoy, interrupt, enjoy once more, or break off, leaving no bitter dregs at the bottom of the cup, either for his companions or himself. Fairly early in life, at twenty-six, he had married a young girl of the wealthy *bourgeoisie* of northern Italy, a brunette of Vicenza with blue eyes, who adored him, and whom he cherished. And it was a perfect union, blessed by four births, four charming, healthy children. No illness, no cares, happiness so constant that it did not even seem possible that it should be otherwise. He and his might have been tempted to think that misfortune is the fault of those who do not know how to manage, or whose propensity to grief is a vice of nature that ought to be medically treated. Such a spirit evidently presupposes a good dose of indifference to the rest of the world, but this selfishness was so amiable and simple that it was never offensive. It must also be said in its defence that the misfortunes of others had the good taste not to make themselves too conspicuous: the despair of the population of the *Mezzogiorno*, through centuries of suffering, had reached that last degree of apathy, when they would not have raised a finger to make a change, for fear of feeling their pain more. Their bitter wisdom is expressed in these words of dreadful irony:

" *Addò ne'à sfiriri, nun c'è perdenza* " ("Where there is no impulse to resist, there is nothing to lose")

And the old wolves of politics, who knew it, took good care to make no change in their misery, for they would have risked waking them up. One of these augurs has said:

" *It is best to let sleeping misery lie* " <sup>1</sup> But the time was coming. The time had come. From the first years of the

<sup>1</sup> Agostino Depretis

---

## THE COMBAT

---

century, the new public taxes which were the result of the African disasters, and the new spirit which began to blow from its apostles, galvanized the paralysis of the *Mezzogiorno* and drove their despair to fury. There arose from the agonizing land the bloody revolts of the Pouilles, and of the Fasci, in Sicily. Count Bruno was forced to perceive it. It was from no bad faith that he did not see sad and unpleasant things; he was content with not going in search of them. From the moment that he saw misery and suffering around him, he and his were charitable to prodigality. But it was only in an occasional and intermittent fashion. It was a case of "*Out of sight, out of mind*." His amiable eyes had so much to occupy them! He had one of those happy natures favoured by fate, to which all is enjoyment, without vulgarity, intelligence, work and pleasure, and all the actions of daily life. And he created this atmosphere of happiness around him.

Thus it was until that night of December, 1908, when the bosom of the old chained land was raised by a gust of fury or a sob. And in three minutes, the whole of Messina, ten centuries of glory, and twenty-five thousand human beings, were swallowed up. All Count Bruno's family—his old mother, his brother, his wife and children—were buried in the ruins.

They had been gay the night before, sitting up late, in honour of the brother who had arrived from Rome during the day, and in the rooms on the first floor looking on to the garden of orange trees they had talked for a long time, or listened to the soft silence of the night, and to music. The young sister-in-law sang Bellini—she had a pure, weak voice, like a nightingale's, and Count Bruno sat with closed eyes, lovingly enjoying it. The girl knew it, and kept her eyes upon him as she sang. Their tender flirtation was an open secret, and no one thought of being scandalized. Even the wife and sister smiled at it. Bruno was the spoilt child, everyone thought it natural that everyone else should love him, and he himself was the first to



---

## THE COMBAT

---

think so. He was not infatuated. He loved them all, and they all loved him. So everyone was satisfied. Sibylle, his little daughter, whom he had so named after the last charming queen of Normandy, his youngest and favourite child, sat near him on a stool, her cheek resting on his knees, as she looked up at her beloved father, who smiled at her under his half-closed eyelids, he stroked her silky hair, and he felt beneath his fingers the emotions inside the little round head. The child was too sensitive, more delicate than her brothers, and the stress of growth gave rise to little upsets of her feelings, passing fits of melancholy, and unexplained fears, which they all made fun of. (Bruno was destined to remember them later.) Now, that night, the young mother, a fine pianist, who had been Sgambati's pupil in Rome, letting her hands stray over the piano, had an obscure impulse (why?) to break into the mysterious *andante* of the Seventh Symphony. At the first *crescendo* of the sad inexorable March (they call it a wedding march, but whose! a wedding with death?), the little girl burst into sobs, cried, "No!" and ran away. They changed the music. Her father took her in his arms. They went to the window. The child was prattling again, and one of her little hands twisted her father's beard round her fingers. The two young women, her mother and aunt, also came to the window and breathed in the fragrance of the garden, both leaned on Bruno's shoulders, without jealousy. Flora, the wife, said to her sister

"Come, Gemma, kiss him, you're dying to, and he can give your kiss back to me!"

From the foot of the cliff they could hear the sound of the sea's lips against the shore. And in the sky, above the roof, the fiery eye of the Cyclops Sirius. The three of them stood silent, cheek to cheek. And in his hands, that little bird, the child's palpitating heart.

Happy nights have no history. The clasp of love is begun in a dream and ends therein. And the mind does not

---

## THE COMBAT

---

distinguish the moment when it recovers consciousness That last night did not hear the child Happiness, the familiar guest of the house, suddenly break off his song, and fly, weeping, far from Messina

. . .

Husband and wife woke at the first shock Bruno felt Flora's foot tighten suddenly on his, like a bird on a branch Dawn was pale at the windows With one impulse they found themselves sitting on the bed, with bare legs, ready to jump up The bed was shaking, the house cracking from roof to base And outside, a noise of tiles, and breaking windows, a chimney clattered down

Earthquake is a well-known visitor in those parts, and though the easy-going South soon forgets, when its visits are far apart, everyone has learned, from father to son, what must be done Lose no time in lamentation Fly to open spaces Or if there is no time, lean against a main wall Flora rushed to the other rooms, where the children were already screaming, to carry them into the garden But a second shock, then a third, more violent, like a heaving wave, made the whole house rock, the walls of the rooms swelled like sails, the great *soffitti* of the ceilings twisted, bare feet stumbled on the uneven floors, and from without arose the thunder of the town and of the sea A clamour as of the Day of Judgment -

It was but the space of a few seconds In such moments the distracted brain perceives only the shriek of its own terror Bruno realized that there was no time to escape by the staircase, and calling to his wife to follow him, he rushed to the balcony, for his instinct, in which there slept the seed of some very old experience, suggested to him that when the house is falling, one must get as near as possible to the outer wall, so as to have more chance of being rescued from the ruins But for all the rest of his life, he reproached himself for having followed his instinct, instead of rushing to the others, to rally and save them, or to die together For none of them had

understood his intention, and he had no time to explain it to them      Last picture      At the next window, the young bare breasts of Gemma, holding out her arms to him      And Sibylle's tearful cry, calling "Papa!"      With a thundering crash, the ancient dwelling collapsed      Everything disappeared—with Bruno's consciousness

He came to (when?) in a berth on a ship which was carrying him away from the accursed coast—then (flashes of consciousness rose at long intervals from the darkness, and fell back again), in a hospital in Naples, after dangerous operations      He had sustained a fractured thigh, fracture of the skull, and concussion of the brain      He could remember nothing of the past      The first thing that came back to him was the anguish and sorrow      But he could not attach them to any fixed point      They were in a dark cloud      He could not link the two ideas together, he wore himself out struggling to reach the light, and he trembled at what the light might reveal      It came suddenly!      The cloud opened      He heard Sibylle's feeble cry      He cried out

"My little one      "

He made an effort to rise, but he was under restraint, he bruised himself against a wall      The nurses held his arms      He continued calling out

"My darlings! I am here! I'm coming      Where are you?"

They did their utmost to calm him      He succeeded in reconstructing in his mind the last moments before the collapse, and he begged them to tell him where the others were      he wanted them to tell him that they were saved      They took care not to contradict him, they put him off with vague assurances, which did not deceive him for an instant, but he made them repeat them over and over again      otherwise he could not have lived, and, in spite of himself, the selfishness of life forced him to do so      But a few days later, after he had long weighed every word, every look of those around him, and his own memories,

## THE COMBAT

his eyes implored the doctor, who was bending over him (he knew him he belonged to a family of the *Mezzogiorno*, who were on friendly terms with the Chiarenza) he said "I know, I know I am not asking you whom I have lost I am only asking whom I have left!"

He saw such compassion in the eyes he questioned, that frozen with terror, he gripped the strong hand that rested open on his bed, and he cried

"No! Someone is left Who? Tell me who?"

The doctor bent down and kissed him It seemed as if he was going down, a second time From the depth of the abyss he sobbed

"Why, why have you saved me?"

The next day he sobbed no more, he had not a tear left His face was ravaged, but calm, as he made them tell him the details gathered from eyewitnesses He alone had been found, half buried, on the edge of the ruins All the rest was one great heap There had been no means of making a search Arms were lacking The whole town was in ruins The few hundred survivors were given up to bestial panic, in which the spur of unsatiated death (the earth was still rumbling, and from hour to hour the last ruins could be heard falling) brought forth the inner lust and cruelty of these damned souls A people lay beneath the ruins And God was under the ruins Those who were alive, male and female, the dead souls, were coupling on and under the altars The first help, which came by sea, followed upon the atrocious sack by the barbarians For scarcely an hour after the catastrophe, rapacious bands came down to pillage the dead And a people came down from the mountains, robbers of ruins, who for centuries have kept watch for the collapse of cities, like those who of yore kept watch for shipwrecks, on our coasts of Brittany Fortunately, Bruno heard nothing of all this till later He had enough to do to bear up against the ferocity of nature

He gathered up all his strength He resolved to go back to

the scene of the disaster No hope was left Three weeks had gone by But he wanted to see and to touch Ah ! who can say ? Magdalene, who saw the Master's death with her own eyes, and touched his cold body with her hands, went back next day to seek him living, and she found the Gardener Whom would he find beneath the ruins ? They tried, in vain, to dissuade him He was still in splints He made them carry him on a stretcher A devoted friend went with him In spite of heavy weather, he lay on deck all night, staring, drawing out of the darkness, like a magnet, the land of terror, the proximity of which was signalled by the fires of Stromboli To protect the wound in his skull, in which a silver plate, with gold nails, had been inserted, he wore a leather helmet, which made him look like a Norman crusader He, too, was bound for the Holy Sepulchre ! Sepulchre of a people " *Horror, Fetor* " As soon as they reached Reggio, the wind brought the stench The giant God was rotting under the hills of orange trees Almost vomiting in his litter, the crusader, with implacable resolution, had himself carried up to the place where his nest had been From the day of the catastrophe no hand had touched the ruins They discouraged effort They rose in a pyramid, which by the derision of Fate was crowned with the fallen escutcheon of the Chiarenza, it bore, beneath a torch, the old device

" *Per Chiarita Carità* " (" By Light, Love ")

Beneath that mountain they all lay, all of his flesh, all his race " *Love, Light* " The torch was extinguished It was the tomb of the Chiarenza Let it remain so !

He never rebuilt the house Later on he had the *tumulus* covered with cement, and on the giant pyramid he engraved the inscription

" *Ruinæ Sacrum* "

Later, later, he would consecrate the altar to " the Great Mother " (Μήτηρ μεγίστη), " The Black Earth " (Γῆ μέλαινα)

As he returned by boat to Naples, he met another wounded

---

## THE COMBAT

---

man, another of the damned, escaped from Hell, who related the haunting sights he had seen among the ruins, men swooping down on still warm bodies to despoil them, and how he had seen them break a suppliant's arms to tear off her bracelets. He cried

“ Let them all be killed ! All mankind should be exterminated. Oh ! when will the earth finish crushing her vermin ? ”

And in his heart, Bruno gave thanks to the Black Mother that she had, at least, saved his dead from the hell of men.

He shut himself up for nearly a year in an isolated house on the borders of the Maremma, not far from Ninfa and Cape Circeo. It was part of one of the many estates of the family, all of which now came to him, it was certainly the least favoured, no member of the family had ever been there. The sparse population, whose flocks grazed among the ruins, nearly all emigrated to the mountains for eight months in the year, leaving three or four victims to guard their walls. They were ravaged by malaria. Not one of the kingly proprietors, one of whom dominated the marshes from his eagle's nest, ever distributed a grain of quinine among them. Their bird-eyes found pleasure in that deserted immensity of reeds and water. Bruno remained there during the reign of fever, and he caught it. What did he care ? The only human beings he had an opportunity of seeing during those months, an old woman, who waited on him, her little girl, and her young son (there was not a fourth in the forsaken district) had the fever like himself. They never thought of being surprised at it. The boy (he was thirteen, and he was the man, the head of the family) knew, and said calmly that they were doomed. He had beautiful, pure features, a bloodless complexion, eyes blazing with intelligence, a grave bearing, as conscious of his responsibility, a quiet and simple way of speaking, a serious mouth, enlivened at rare intervals by a childish smile. He was called Athanase. After months of morose silence, which this young companion respected, the latter was the only one with whom Bruno at

last consented to exchange once more the bread of souls, speech. And the child was strangely able to keep in unison. The eighth month which marked the return of the living and their flocks from the mountains, had not elapsed before Bruno had lavished on the boy all the despairing passion which he could no longer pour upon his dead.

He took him away from that earth which was sucking his blood. He had given the mother and daughter a pension and settled them in Taranto. He took the dark-eyed boy, who seemed to have heard the same soul-call, with him to a villa on one of the last ranges of hills that dominate the Gulf of Taranto between Metaponto and Sybaris. He taught him, and found his mind a marvellous field. Bruno's fevered solitude had laid open to him certain secret windings of his own mind, which he had hitherto neglected: the occult meaning of the old myths of Ancient Greece, the beautiful texts and images of which had merely occupied the amused indifference of his learned dilettantism. And as, during the long months of silence side by side, a strange permeability had developed between the elder and young companion, Bruno, as he gave them forth, read his own visions in the boy's eyes. And gradually, without realizing it, he moulded them to the obscure shapes of that mind which was waking—and with it the genius of that age-old land, where Pythagoras slept close beside them. Extraordinary conversations, in which the little creature, attentive, eager, but unamazed, received from the lips of the elder, who rediscovered them in those eyes like a burning abyss, the luminous legends of triple meaning of the profound theogony of the Orphics: the six generations of the gods—Dionysos, the sixth kingdom—and the Titans. To the child, whom neither school nor church had fished out of his fever-marsh, Christ had remained a "*forestiere*" (a stranger), he only knew of His death from the bells up there, on the hills. He was a rich man! He respected Him from afar, but had never known Him. And as to Bruno, whose practising Catholicism up to the eve of the catastrophe

---

## THE COMBAT

---

had been amiable and skin-deep, the heaving earth of Messina, with one thrust of the shoulder, had overthrown it with its palace nothing remained but ruins upon which the furious wind of despair had blown for months. In the days immediately following he had hated the God in whom he had believed. The ground was free for other gods. And the grand myths which slept in the mind of this noble and learned Trinacrian opened their eyes to the Tarentine light, where those of the young Zagreus Dionysos, king of the Mysteries, had flourished. He was not deluded by them, as the child who listened to him might be, but as he related them, Bruno was struck by their divinatory symbolism and their accord with the implacable chain of destiny which overwhelmed him. And as he, the enlightened Sicilian, was not much less superstitious than the child, he soon became intoxicated with the fumes of those dreams which the sun drew forth from that land of ghosts along with the sickly-sweet odours of the waters sleeping level with the soil. His ruined town evoked for him the convulsions of Typhœus crushed beneath the weight of Etna, and the ferocity of the Titans who traitorously seized the child Dionysos, tore him to pieces, and devoured him, was identified with the blind fury of the elements which had annihilated all he loved, all that, in the selfishness of his sorrow, was Life. But that love, that life, were reviving. The eyes of the visionary found them once more in this child, whom his need to love, his vital instinct, had embraced. They did more in the semi-hallucination which the light of this mirage engendered in his poet-brain, shaken by the catastrophe, the child was to him the very image of the child Dionysos risen again, and so he saw him suddenly, one night, just as he is depicted in the Homeric hymn, seated "*on the edge of the inexhaustible sea, on the jutting point of a promontory, his beautiful black hair floating on his shoulders*", chilly and feverish, wrapping himself in a tattered red cloak, and "*smiling*" "*with his dark eyes*"

With the dazzling vision, his anxiety returned. For the



young god "*the suffering god*" was he not to die once more? Too late, he perceived upon the lad's pale face, as he shivered in the sunlight, the shadow of the wing of *Mephitis*, queen of Fever. He had not had the prudence to uproot the sickly plant from that poisonous soil, and carry him far away to the North, to different air, in another land. He had been content to remove him a few miles from the fatal fields, and to go up to the hills, a little further, a little higher. He could not even resist the dangerous fascination of often going down with him to the magic zone of ruins on the seashore. He who has once heard the voice of the sirens finds it very difficult to escape them. Though the danger be known, how evade the call of that oasis in the desert, those luxuriant shades, between which gleams the laughing eye of the vagrant courseless waters—that enchanted quietude, that flower of shimmering reflections of sea and sky? When Bruno perceived it, the mischief was done, the doom was sealed. It was too late to appeal against it. Besides, would there have been time a year earlier? The little god had been doomed from his birth. For thousands of days, for thousands of nights, the poison had accumulated in his veins, as in the arteries of the plain, with muffled steps the fever had worked on, it had penetrated to the depths, and now, in full possession of the place, it breathed forth its tigerish breath.

Bruno was appalled by the violence of the attacks—the chattering teeth, the icy waves that shook the boy's body from head to foot for hours with deadly ague, and were followed by uncontrollable vomiting, a furnace, burning face and delirium. Bruno clasped his bird in his arms, vainly endeavouring now to warm him against his own breast, now to breathe coolness on him. And, like a mother, he wiped away the sweat that drenched linen and sheets, he sponged and changed him. He fought death inch by inch for poor little Dionysos, with his cadaverous face, swollen body and thin limbs from which the flesh melted day by day. He was everything to him in the battle

fought together father, mother, brother and sister He had staked all upon this being, all his love This sole flame was the last brand on his hearth, his heart had concentrated in it all the rest of the vanished fire If he had heeded the inward howling of rebellion, he would have abandoned himself to frenzy, like the Titans of the legend But he held in his arms the little Christ of Metaponto, who was carrying the cross of his Passion—*Διονύσου τὰ ταθήματα*—and who seemed conscious of it The child never ceased staring at him with his deep dark eyes which in moments of delirium were a gulf, but where even in the shadows, reigned a strange peace And when the disease gave the broken body a brief respite, the child tenderly begged his friend for one more of his beautiful tales—its continuation, or its repetition from the beginning again And Bruno, as if inspired by the appeal of the young dying god, revealed to him—and to himself at the same time—the mystery of his fate the sacrificed Saviour of the Orphic Gospel who, twenty-five centuries before the "*Durch Lieden Freude*" of our heroes, taught men, by his example, to conquer eternity by suffering and death—the god who breaks the wheel of births to reintegrate his elect in the plenitude and joy of the One Who can say if the child understood these thoughts? But his instinct was in accord with them His original fatalism, as of a victim bound on the pyre, had betrothed him, from birth, to murderous Nature, who was devouring him He accepted his betrothed, his lady Fever with her eyes like a sunlit lake, and her necklaces of vipers among the reeds It was so! He accepted And now he was to wed her Like a little man he firmly pressed the hand of the friend he was about to leave And when ague shook him, he seemed to ask pardon He said, half dreaming, that he was going on a "*pellegrinaggio pè l'Angile*"<sup>1</sup> He stroked Bruno's cheek with his thin hand

A deadly attack carried him off He died, on a day when

<sup>1</sup>On a pilgrimage to the Church of San Michele al Gargano—the Mount of Miracles, on the spur of the Italian boot

the sun beat fiercely on the mirage of the marshes, his arms crossed, his wide eyes drinking in the abyss of the blue sky, blue without a fleck his open mouth drank it in—And in his own confusion, Bruno, hanging upon the boy's last breath, seemed to see the stream of the world engulfed by that mouth ,

To complete the symbol, the late autumn light failed Winter was coming Dionysos, the slain god, was disappearing—He would rise again, in the spring, as he whom the Thyiades saluted, the Δικνίτης, the New-Born

Bruno closed his eyes, washed his body, and buried him unaided, on the slope of the hills that go down to the sea, in the middle of a clump of young almond trees, and on the mound, he raised a simple stele, with the single word

Ἀθάνατος<sup>1</sup>

Around his child's mound murmured the bees' wings of two Golden Verses

“ ἐς αἰθέρ ἐλύθερον Ἀθάνατος θεὸς ἄμβροτος ”<sup>2</sup>

Then he returned to the “ *mortals* ”

### XXXIII

Nearly two years had passed since the cataclysm Very few still thought about it, when Bruno reappeared among men But those who remembered, wondered, at the sight of this ghost, if they had dreamed it The face of Count Chiarenza, the last of his race, showed not a trace of it He not only never mentioned it, and let pitying allusions pass, as if unheard, but his calm features wore a grave, detached smile The trial had only left its mark upon his hair, and his silky, well-kept beard, which had gone prematurely grey (he was only forty) But he was in the prime of his strength—agile and robust of

<sup>1</sup> “*Immortal*” The word recalls the name of the child—“*Athanase*”

<sup>2</sup> “*In the free ether the God of Ambrosia, the Immortal*”

body For those who did not know from what cloth of dissonances that harmony had been cut, it was a disconcerting sight He was like a tree with all its branches lopped, growing straight upwards The soft-hearted all but reproached him for it Like Pecuchet, they had enjoyed the picture of the tree struck by lightning Count Chiarenza did not tell them that the lightning had penetrated to his marrow, he was like the legendary salamander, fire had become his element He dwelt in it, naked and alone The whole edifice of his happiness, all the structure of his mind, all his past, had been destroyed, cut short, razed to the ground He had been obliged to begin everything anew He had relaid his foundations, alone It had cost him "*quanto sangue*!"<sup>1</sup> But that is the necessary mortar for everything built to last Count Bruno realized that in all he had hitherto built mortar had been totally lacking All he had done, believed he had done, loved, thought, till then, was but a game Ah! lovely game! When he evoked it, heart-rending nostalgia swelled his breast with sobs But it was a game! And how could he be surprised that a breath, a shudder of the earth, had scattered the game to the winds Remained alone that which dies not the terrible Spirit of the eternal One, its implacable light, and its implacable peace He found it in the void made within him, and in the dying eyes of ἀθάνατος He found it under the wrappings of the mummies of those old Trinacrian and Ionian thinkers, which hitherto he had merely looked upon as precious museum pieces They appeared to him now in their true light, in the catastrophic atmosphere which had been theirs, which was now his And now that, following in their footsteps, he had accomplished his κατάβασις εἰς Ἅδου—his descent into Hell—he made their tragic and serene views his own

It would have been of no avail that his intellect was conquered, if the smile of his young companion, in his agony, had

<sup>1</sup> "How much blood!"

not conquered his heart also From his last breath he had breathed in, Acceptation, εὐδχαιμονίχα And if he could not help his wounds reopening in the night (how many nights!) night alone was witness, the blood of his wounds dropped into it, and the victim, lying still on his back, pressing his hands upon his heart, offered his blood in sacrifice to the celestial Harmony of which he was a poignant chord And when day came, indifferent day made clear to men's eyes, not passing sorrow, but Harmony

The total annihilation of his race had brought its whole fortune into his hands It burdened him He had no difficulty in finding a use for it It was the time when Italy had, at last, discovered the unspeakable barbarism in which her wretched *Mezzogiorno*, left to itself, had been sunk for centuries A whole generous-hearted generation had dedicated themselves to the appalling problem, wellnigh insoluble, of rescuing that stagnant savage land from the death that was eating it away Even Parliament—the talkers—in place of action, had passed laws to succour it And private initiative, making up for the insincerity of the State, established organizations for relief and reconstruction in Basilicata and Calabria Count Chiarenza devoted most of his fortune to founding dispensaries, orphanages and schools

But it would have been giving him undeserved credit (and he would have been the first to repudiate it) to attribute this to his good heart He was as yet unborn to brotherly love Ever since the catastrophe which had taken all he had among the living, he cherished a blind, hidden, unacknowledged grudge against those who were still alive Even the illumination of his mind had not availed to heal this festering wound He was ashamed of it, and kept it out of sight He endeavoured, secretly, to cauterize it He forced himself to frequent the company of men, to smile at them and help them But he could not overcome his dislike And he was not always successful in concealing it Certain eyes had caught its icy

flash Then, he could only force his mind to act, without the warm joy of love He did good, endless good, by signature and by proxy No thanks were required He was discharging a debt that weighed upon him, and he said, mentally, to those whose claim was settled "And now, let me see no more of you!" It took him a long time to become reconciled to the human countenance Little Dionysos had to arise from the tomb

The winter sun still lasted It lasted for years Count Chiarenza spent them in study and long journeys In studying his ancient sages, he was led by the star of Pythagoras and Empedocles to the East He had a slight knowledge of Sanskrit He perfected his philological learning, and as his means enabled him to travel far, he spent several years in India and Thibet Between 1911 and 1914, he disappeared Where he was and what manner of life he led, no one ever exactly knew He kept silence upon that period, in which, no doubt, he wandered, as a pilgrim, or beggar on the high plateaux of Asia, or shut himself up for many months in some lamaic monastery, in the concentration of initiation Though so far withdrawn from the world of the living, it may be assumed that he there acquired the amazing penetration which he afterwards displayed In that light of the summits, his eyes, like those of a solitary bird, were purged of dust and tears, and sharpened like a knife on the grindstone and, like a knife, they pierced the human heart He saw into the depths and touched the Sorrow and Error of European civilization, the catastrophe and ruin hanging over the West

He set out at the end of June, 1914, leaving his Himalayan hermitage, and coming down to the plains of the Ganges for he had felt the earth rumbling under his feet, and he was going to meet the War, which very few in Europe had yet foreseen He met it at Calcutta there he became aware of the official declaration of the Massacre from a poster in a street where the blood of slaughtered goats trickled from beneath the gate of a

temple of Kali He embarked for Europe For the intensity of his solitary concentration had revealed to him, like the clasp of two coupled bodies penetrating each other, his overwhelming identity with all the living, which the selfishness of his grief had so long refused to accept And he wished to bear his share in the trial of men

He was aware of the futility and crime of this war, and despite the secret voice of his Latin blood and his sympathy with France, he did his utmost to keep his people outside the carnage But the people were not consulted And when they were thrown into the shambles, Count Chiarenza went with them He enlisted in the Sanitary Service, organized an ambulance, and devoted himself to it He was ever at the most exposed point, and with the most thankless missions, in Albania, in Macedonia, accompanying in their disastrous retreat, or their stagnation in the trenches, the troops from his *Mezzogiorno* devastated by exanthematic typhus and malaria He communicated his calmness of the depths to his staff under fire, and to the savage peasants of Basilicata in their agony, for he did not look upon his work as ended when a case was hopeless, it was then that his real task began, he helped them in their passing He received the *grande medaille des epidemies* and the *croix de guerre*

When the War was over (or suspended for a time), he devoted himself to the uplifting of that *Mezzogiorno*, which he had learned to know better from his "cases", and his martyrs This time he did not content himself with handing over most of his remaining income to *Associazioni* and *Opere nazionali*, who undertook to make use of them, without his eyes seeing what became of the gift of his hands (for indifference can make capital of the abnegation taught by the maxim which demands that the left hand shall not know what the right hand gives) he established himself on the spot, at Potenza, where hundreds of families burrowed underground like maggots, in *sottani*, dried-up cisterns and caves He enlisted in the crusade to

## THE COMBAT

deliver these betrayed, given up, forsaken "sons of man" from their sepulchres, to fight for that unhappy land against the three succubae, the three murderous Goddesses who suck its blood, whom Bruno had evoked before Annette upon the hill which the deadly vapours of the marshes encircled with a moon-like halo—Poverty, Fever and the Fire of the earth—and worse than these three, the fourth, who is called, as the case may be, Acceptation, Resignation, or Apathy, which is torpid passivity under the blows of a fate which its victims no longer even strive to avert "Since it has been so for centuries, it will be so *in sæcula*" The Middle Ages still persisted, like an ulcer, in the side of a proud people, who were then tasting the bitterness of their disappointments in the victory, and whose rhetoricians incited them to vindicate the inheritance of the "*Imperium Romanum*!" But there was one part of that War heritage of glory, conquests and bombastic ideology, that did not tempt them in those first post-War years—that of those legionaries of the old Republic who, on returning to their homes, laboriously conquered their own land—those who drained the stagnant blood of the fever fields, and re-established in the great body of Italy the arterial system of their mighty aqueducts It was not only in the body that the blood needed to flow again, it was in the soul of those lands that lay as if bound by evil spells—they would have said "*l'han pigliata d'uoocchi*" ("the evil eye has touched it")

The beautiful clear calm eyes of Count Chiarenza engaged in battle against the evil eye He went about the whole region, dressing physical and moral wounds, playing in turn the parts of doctor, apostle and navvy, leaving everywhere a luminous track beneath his feet A slender thread But like Tom Thumb's pebbles, it enabled those who followed to find their way through the forest For people followed him He revealed to himself a genius for organization and a missionary zeal which he would never have suspected His passionate idealism roused other consciences, men and women of the



highest and lowest classes—a little cohort, ardent and pure, such as perhaps can be found, to that degree only in that Italy where meet the extremes of the soul—mud and fire

It was during one of his circuits in the *Agri*, in the south of Pisticci, that Annette met him in the train that goes up the valley of the Basento

## XXXIV

Count Bruno only gave his confidant of a night a fugitive panorama of the wide sweep of his life, which had embraced such different landscapes, the orange gardens of Messina, Dionysos of the fever in the shimmering marshes, dust of snow on the high plateaux of Thibet, and so many summits and abysses. But the broad outlines were clear-cut as an engraving, they were imprinted on Annette's mind. With her quick intuition she penetrated to the hidden heart of that tragic serenity. She did not understand it. She touched it with her fingers. She did not try to question her companion further. He had spoken without any questions from her. Without questions from him, she spoke in her turn, she told him about herself. It was a spontaneous impulse, in thanks for what he had confided to her.

When they got into the train again, they were old friends. Bruno took care of the invalid, who was still a little feverish from her influenza pneumonia, which was not quite cured, and though his own way did not coincide with hers, he would not leave her till, after spending a night at Naples, he had settled her, with affectionate solicitude, in the long train which was to take her back to Paris. Everything had been simple between them, there was nothing equivocal about their fraternization. Yet there was no question of meeting again. It was enough to know that they both existed. They regularly exchanged brief and faithful greetings for January the First.

Annette, too taken up by her tasks—the cares of her triple and quadruple existence (her own and those of her children and grandchild)—had neither time nor means to follow the career of her old Italian friend. She did not know that the name of Count Chiarenza had acquired a certain renown, and he was the person least likely to inform her of it.

Count Bruno had continued his social mission, but at the same time the old meditative and learned vein of his mind had been reopened, and considerably deepened and widened. The very works which he directed in Basilicata to drain and irrigate the land and infected waters, led to archaeological discoveries, which roused the demon of science and broke the seal of silence that had been set upon his tongue for twelve years. He first published a few pamphlets, then books, in which the new acquisitions of his mind in the domain of orientalism were added to his deep Hellenist learning. And though, with aristocratic discretion, he kept his personality out of his scientific researches, no practised reader could fail to discern in the objectivity of his descriptions the depth of an original and solitary spirit and the harmony of a Mediterranean mind and style. Honours came unsought. Foreign academies, among them the *Academie des Inscriptions* of Paris, elected him as a corresponding member. Julien Davy, who by very different ways, had inclined towards Indiology, was among the first to perceive the new and antique grandeur of that mind, he entered into correspondence with him. The starting-point was the discussion of the Pythagorean texts, which Julien was studying for his historical and scientific works, and it soon led to the most intimate problems of metaphysical and religious thought, in these discussions both men recognized their mutual sincerity, and their analagous, though so different, experiences of the abyss. They were friends before they acknowledged it to each other, for both had the same haughty reserve.

They were too detached from the political farce to imagine

that they would some day be mixed up in it. But the farce had become tragedy (" *Commediante*      *Tragediante*      "), and by the misfortune of the times—the leaders of opinion and guides, both political and intellectual, having totally abdicated, or proved traitors—the liberties of Europe and all the sacred possessions of the spirit, conquered by centuries of effort, had been delivered over to rapacious bands who were tearing them to pieces. The few men whose consciences were not blinded were forced to become the awakeners and guardians of the rest—even though it was not their job. In shipwreck, saving is the job of anyone who can tackle it. "Or we will perish together. But I will perish with open eyes!"

Julien's eyes had already refused the bandage with which his colleagues, with frenzied docility, had blinded themselves during the War. He had scornfully rejected all offers to participate in infecting French opinion with lies and hatred. He had thus ruined his certain election to the Academy. And as we have seen, he had had the honour of being hissed, during his lectures at the College de France, by certain vigorous stay-at-home combatants. But they had not gone so far as to close his class. He still had—much against his will—a few right-thinking supporters, belonging to his old conservative Catholic world, who feared the scandal of forsaking one of their own caste whose scrupulous loyalty they knew, and in their hearts respected. They had contented themselves with putting an extinguisher on "defeatist" manifestoes bearing Julien's compromising signature. These were rare and little known, for the censorship used their scissors, and Julien's "*alma sdegnosa*" was averse to all publicity. His too clear-sighted pessimism had no illusions as to the futility of his isolated action. He was content with having said "No!" to the traitors of his confraternity.

After the War, some were found in every country who had said the same. Naturally, their hands were outstretched to

---

## THE COMBAT

---

each other, and without their seeking it, the force of circumstances united these men in an international vanguard of the Mind, which was frequently obliged to oppose the monstrous abuses and crimes, the outcome of war and the fetid peace—the Tiger's breath. The most illustrious among these heretics was Einstein, one of whose first visits in Paris was to Julien Davy. And it was not long before their ranks opened to admit Count Chiarenza.

But he was in no hurry to enter them. He remained resolutely outside the action of the day. When Communist, and then Fascist troubles broke out in Italy, he took no notice of them so long as his activities and social work were not affected. He worked for all who suffered (*And who does not suffer, at bottom?*) He did not interfere with politics—But politics came and interfered with him. Fascism tried to meddle in his work, to get control and annex it. He resisted with gentle firmness. And for quite a long time these brutal men, unused to sparing anything, still tolerated him, abashed by his unquestionable disinterestedness. They imagined that, as millions passed through his hands, some of it, according to the excellent habit of professional philanthropists, must stick to his fingers. But nothing stuck to Count Chiarenza's white hands (not so white as they had been before he took to wielding spade or trowel). He had completely ruined himself in the service of his vast starving family. The place was indeed without profit. It tempted nobody any further. But though lucre was not at stake, the spirit of violence and petty persecution could not long leave in peace these hands of good Samaritans, whose only thought was to dress wounds, instead of inflicting them—*which, it seems, is the virile mark of men who are really men, those who make wars and Revolutions, the new or old-new order—or who unmake them.* They did not attack him personally, for without his knowledge he was protected by certain dignitaries of the new power (an intelligent, sceptical philosopher, director of Public Education,

who relished, not the ideas, but the harmonious style of Count Chiarenza's writings), but they persecuted those who were inspired by his example and carried out his instructions, teachers male and female, who devoted themselves to the laborious mission of uplifting those forsaken populations they tried to force such teachers to signatures and oaths of political servitude, repugnant to their conscience, to the new despotism, established on the ruins of the Statute by the treason of the very man who had constituted himself its guardian To these men and women of good faith conscience was not a game, as it was to the minister Gentile, who when Count Chiarenza came to protest against the violence done to the soul of his disciples, answered ironically

" But, *caro mio*, does not the Gospel tell us that ' we must lose our soul, to save it ' ? "

For Bruno had been obliged to make up his mind to leave the field of his labours, and come to Rome, to defend his work and his people And once he had come into the open, he witnessed the atrocious struggle which was devastating and withering thousands of Italian consciences He could no longer refrain from seeing, judging, and speaking He even chanced to witness the violence committed against an old comrade-in-arms, a doctor, a wounded hero, decorated and respected, who was set upon, insulted and savagely trampled upon in the streets by a gang of good-for-nothings After receiving his share of blows—for, of course, he intervened—he went into court to bear witness for him, in spite of the menaces and threats of death which could be heard booming outside As may be supposed, it did not make him more timid in his speech ! He used to say afterwards, laughingly, that against those " Houm " <sup>1</sup>, those black demons (black shirts and black souls), he had felt red revolutionary wings sprouting on his shoulders He changed from defender to accuser He called the court itself and the police to account for authorizing the

<sup>1</sup> In Thibetan the " Houm " are the black denizens of Purgatory

---

## THE COMBAT

---

violence done to justice and the liberty of testimony His imposing figure, his great name, his speech (he said he discovered the voice of a tenor of la Scala in his throat), confounded his audience for a few moments The public Ministry excused itself piteously, and silence was imposed without But Count Chiarenza paid for it

"And," he said jokingly, "it served me right, it recalled me to the serene indifference to the Wheel of Appearances, on which I prided myself The whirlwind of dust had caught me up again"

The "black shirts" were waiting for him outside the court, and he was nearly torn to pieces It did not make him more prudent, but only more ironical, and perfectly self-possessed those who were interested in him tried in vain to keep him out of danger, by persuading him not to run into it The moment was bound to come when they could influence him no longer He refused to go abroad, though life in Italy was becoming more and more difficult for him He had made up his mind to stay as long as he could lessen the suffering a little, and help the oppressed He persisted in it, gentle and tenacious And when it became impossible for him to help openly he did it clandestinely, cheating the surveillance of the police with Italian good-humour He corresponded or collaborated, for objects of pure humanity, with the political enemies of Fascism

Relegated to "*domicilio coatto*", he found means to continue, under the noses of his kindly gaolers In nearly every good old Italian, there is a vein of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, which can keep his heart merry in the most tragic moments, and is a great resource in apparently hopeless situations The grave Count Chiarenza combined the magic powers of his "lamas" with the expedients of Punchinello to make his own keepers take a hand in the game he was playing for the service of humanity, the stake in which might have been his head After having fooled them at his ease, after making them carry compromising messages without their big noses smelling a rat,

---

## THE COMBAT

---

the day before he was to be arrested and deported to the Lipari Islands he managed to walk quietly out of his house, leaving his good carabinieri waiting for him, not beneath the trysting tree, but outside the door of the w c from which he escaped through an *œil-de-bœuf* on to the staircase (At fifty-six he was as agile and supple as a gymnast) He passed leisurely through the town of Piedmont, where business and the police had long detained him, as if out for a walk, he went on, beyond the city, at the same brisk quiet pace all day and night without stopping, and when the wall of the Alps lay across his path, he scrambled up

Here his experience of Thibet did him service He was pretty well acquainted with those regions, and he had a military map, but he was ill-equipped for glacier-climbing at the beginning of the winter for instead of taking the easiest route, which would naturally prove a mouse-trap, he made straight for the most perilous the Saint Theodule Pass Luckily, he found connivance among the mountaineers, who without any show of understanding the circumstances, furnished him with spiked boots, ropes, a pickaxe, a shepherd's coat, and a little guide for half the way Nevertheless, he was in great danger for in trying to avoid the Fascist watchers on the frontier, he wandered into the snow and lost his way He had to spend a night against a wall of ice above a precipice, he would have been frozen if he had not had recourse to his Thibetan "*toumo*" practices which by their psycho-physiological mechanism, teach how to stimulate internal heat, and the virtues of which the great poet-ascetic, Milarepa, has tested and sung He arrived, harassed and bristling with ice, icicles on his eyebrows and an ice-pack in his beard, at a refuge on Swiss territory, where he found a blazing wood fire and a hot drink, provided for him by chamois hunters He then became conscious of the deadly cold holding him like a shell, against which the inward heat had fought for fifteen hours He nearly melted But a dead sleep, in a bath of sweat, watched over by

these good souls, set him on his feet again, and after going down with them to Zermatt, where he rested for a day or two, he settled himself comfortably at Viège in the Simplon train for Paris.

He had been preceded by the rumour of his escape, clumsily set on foot, then still more clumsily denied, and proved by the anger of his abashed and crestfallen gaolers and their Master, who vented his fury upon them. The Italian refugees in Paris, informed by telegrams from Switzerland, were waiting to greet his arrival, and for some days he was the prey of reporters. But the roguish Italian knew how to defend himself, he related his escape from the *Inferno* and his "*salto mortale*" over the mountains, like a scene from a Venetian comedy. The laughter of Paris at the expense of the cheated tyrant turned the knife in the wound. And rage produced dead silence beyond the Alps. But Count Bruno's adventure supplied the newspapers of Europe with copy for two or three weeks. The hero dodged his celebrity by accepting the offer of Julien Davy to take refuge in his house. It was a joy to the two men to meet at last after so many years of distant intimacy, and with closed doors, well defended against intruders, politics were not the chief subjects of their conversations. They had recognized each other at the first glance, as having touched the depths of tragic human experience, and having got out of it unaided, by cutting themselves steps with their own pickaxes in the ice of the terrible wall. But the steps had not been the same for both. Nor the pickaxe. Nor the arm. Nor the mind either. One had chosen the ridge of the slope in the sun. Or rather the sun had chosen him. For the other, it was shadow. But both had reached the same level, or very nearly! And they exchanged a look of fraternal understanding.

Their dialogue was often interrupted—illuminated—by the presence of George. She was then in all the bloom of her eighteen years, and she was quite smitten with the old mountaineer, for she was chiefly fascinated by his athletic prowess.



---

## THE COMBAT

---

And as he perceived in her that healthy and carefree joy of athleticism, physical activity and adventure, he was glad to tell her of his travels in Thibet—omitting all that had to do with his researches into mind. They spent hours talking about these things, which did not interest Julien, old Bruno as childishly pleased to relate as the young girl was to listen. He gazed tenderly at her round, young, joyous face, the fine sun-kissed skin, the firm tissue of her arms, neck and cheeks, the bright eyes where never an intellectual shadow passed, not a sorrow, not a fear—nothing beyond, but *that* which one held was the world, it was enough! As with the universe of the ancients, "*finis orbis terrarum*" Beyond the Pillars is Calypso. Let us remain on this side with Nausicaa and Penelope! He called her "*Mare nostrum*", Mediterranean. And on her mouth, a red and golden fruit, untouched by lipstick, he saw again, with melancholy sweetness, as in the mirage of a tender dream, the carefree, happy smile of the young sister-in-law who sang Schubert's "The Miller's Wife" and the brook's lullaby, above the gulf of Polyphemus.

Now, one day when the three of them, Julien, George and Bruno, were at table, in the course of conversation, Bruno chanced to mention the woman, a Frenchwoman, whom he had once met on the roads—he might have said on the rails—of Basilicata. And making inquiries about her, he said her surname "*Madame Riviere*". George exclaimed, clapped her hands and imprudently cried "*Annette?*"

Which was the more surprised? Bruno or Julien? How could he have imagined that his daughter knew anything about one whom he had never mentioned to her? He could not conceal his stupefaction, and George blushed. She bit her tongue. Too late! "Well, then, out with it!"

Brazenly, calmly, the little humbug with the shining eyes turned to her father and said

"You know her!"

And she said laughingly to Bruno

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"She was father's very dear friend!"

She added

"And now I want her to be mine"

Julien was in extreme confusion, which shrewd Count Bruno perceived. He frowned and tried to silence George with a severe look. But that was not going to stop her. She thought

"I have waited for it long enough! I can't miss the opportunity. I'll jump at it!"

And she said

"Let's invite her!"

Julien exclaimed

"What is all this nonsense?"

"It's quite simple," said George. "I have wanted to see her for twenty years. I shall see her, at last!"

At this, Julien was completely at sea. He grasped the fact that his daughter knew all. He could not imagine how (He never dared to ask her, even later, those memories were so sacred to him!) He could not have mentioned them to anyone. It hurt him even to think that George knew anything about them. He refused to give the invitation, and with clumsy abruptness, tried to change the subject. Luckily for him, Bruno came to his rescue and delivered him from his tormentor. She pursed up her lips to keep from laughing, she was all aglow with mischief. Bruno looked at them both, guessed, laughed in his heart, had pity on the old child and gently pulled the other one's ear. It was arranged that Mme Riviere should be invited, not to Davy's house, but to a lecture that Bruno was to give at a meeting organized in the hall of the Sociétés Savantes.

For he had not been able to escape, nor could his host save him, from the obligation of taking part in a protest meeting of the French Antifascist League of whose Executive Committee Julien was one of the Vice-Presidents. (Julien, as usual, had not tried to become one, nor to avoid it.)

---

## THE COMBAT

---

It was done accordingly. But at the lecture, when Bruno delighted the audience by the simple and direct eloquence of his implacable indictment of the tyrants, Annette did not appear. She had influenza, and sat by the fire at home. She had not read the papers for a week or two. (Even women who are far from uninterested in social matters rarely have the constancy to show continuous interest. Their attention is subject to eclipses. The life of their heart engrosses them.) She knew nothing about Count Chiarenza's escape and his presence in Paris. And her son and daughter-in-law, who took good care not to miss the chance of seeing and hearing the "*fuoruscito*" at his meeting, never thought of mentioning it to Annette. They seldom saw her, and were absent-minded when they did. Completely taken up with the joy of their reunion, they were like schoolchildren on holiday.

George was disappointed. She searched the room, in vain, for Annette's face. She recognized (she knew everything, the little bright-eyed baggage!) Annette's son, and his "*Moscotte*", as she called her, she even gave herself the pleasure, though they did not know her, of introducing them to Count Bruno after the lecture, for they were both burning to shake hands with him. But it was impossible to carry on a conversation in the crush of people crowding round the platform, and the presence of the young couple was not sufficient compensation to George. It was Annette she wanted to see—and to have.

Well, then, since she was determined (that was now quite settled!) who the deuce could prevent her? She never rested till she had inspired Count Chiarenza with the idea of visiting Annette. And she offered to go with him. He was not taken in, and on the way he tactfully got her to tell him of the old romance, which his shrewdness had guessed at. George was more than willing. The secret had burned her tongue too long. And the old Italian had grown to be her comrade in pranks, almost an accomplice. As she told him about her burglary, it seemed to her that he had helped her with it, had

---

## THE COMBAT

---

shared equally in the responsibility. At certain funny incidents they stood still, in the Luxembourg, laughing till they cried. And at the same time Bruno's eyes said, as he shook his head at her: "Shame! you little thief! Aren't you ashamed?" And she felt like answering: "What about you?" It did not prevent them both from feeling the pathos of that poor, wasted, wounded love. And they were silent, all the rest of the way. When they were near the house, George said:

"What I did was disgusting, all the same! You will never trust me again."

He asked:

"But if it was to do again, child, you would do it?"

She burst out laughing.

"Of course!"

They went upstairs gaily. But her heart was beating fast. Perhaps that was why she laughed so much. She refused to go in with him, saying that he would find her waiting in the square close by, when he came out. However, she consented to sit and wait in the lobby. She hoped (though she dreaded) that she would catch Annette at the end of the visit as she passed by to show Bruno out. But Bruno came to fetch her. In the middle of the conversation, after the first effusions between the two old friends, he remembered his Antigone: he said to Annette:

"Allow me. A lover is languishing at your door."

And he went and took George by the hand. Though she was dying to go in, he had to drag her.

### XXXV

George had made a complete Annette for herself, different from the real one. She had made her—if not in her own image—at least in that of her kin. For she liked to think that her

father was imbued with that image when he had begotten her. She knew it was a tale she had made up for herself, she laughed at it, but caressed it.

And the Annette she had invented had introduced her into the world of passion which she herself did not wish to enter, it was as if her double dispensed her from it, and acted for her. The pleasure of that long dream, that had gone on for several years, with no fever or stir, was to live over—in her own fashion, in comfort—the adventures of the other Annette, like a novel invented for oneself, on the pillow at night. George had made up a life of passion for herself, that she lived like a somnabulist, by proxy. Her real life was not troubled by it. It was the counter-weight required for the balance of her strong nature.

Thousands of women are like that, they faithfully lead a quiet, regular family life, and at bottom, in the depths of their being, they love, act, have adventures, and console themselves for their unused energy and desires. Mons Colas, the Nivernois, with wise banter, would have said to husbands:

“Don't let it make you angry to think that your rib sleeps with a crowd! If you must be cuckolded at all costs, better be so in a dream!—And peace to the dream and the dreamers! When they come back from a long distance, and do not hear what you are saying—with a vague smile, a strange look, and dark rims under the eyes—smile kindly at the navigators! When they return they will find the fireside all the warmer.”

All are not (but many are) as innocent as George was. And with the right kind of innocence—that which does not dream of good or evil. It dreams. And that's all. The swallow glides through the air.

And now the swallow found herself beak to beak with her dream. And the dream was not a bit like the one she had been pursuing. Annette was not the double of anyone whatever! Annette was Annette, herself, and none other.

But what did that matter! The swallow was carried away

---

## THE COMBAT

---

on her swoop, her open beak swallowed up Annette Annette *was* She might be anything she liked ! It was Annette whom George wanted

They looked at each other George, the tall girl, robust and brusque, with the resolute air, suddenly stuck fast and shy—they could see her heaving bosom and her foolish smile Annette, with her white hair, her calm front, her tired face, and her large eyes, her prominent eyes, whose intelligent mirror took in the confusion of the impetuous love of the big little girl And the heart of the awkward Amazon melted at her look, her firm knees trembled She was ready to cry with shame And as timidly raising her lowered eyelids, she met Annette's understanding smile, plunging abruptly she buried her burning face in the bosom of her who read her secrets, and hugged her with all her might Annette cried out

"Stop ! Stop ! She's breaking me !"

George released her, abashed Annette raised the girl's head, saw her face, scarlet, happy, ashamed, with two big tears in her eyes Count Bruno was laughing, Annette laughed, and George wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, like a boy, laughed too And Annette asked

"But who has given me this daughter ?"

George answered

"Julien Davy I am his daughter"

Annette's large eyes grew larger She said nothing She took George by the shoulders, she gazed at her And she said "Done ! I adopt you"

### XXXVI

George came again, in the morning She came again in the evening And the days following The hall was full of flowers There were not enough vases to hold them She brought them in armfuls She established herself in the house,

she had already taken to addressing Assia as *tu*, and she took possession of the little boy Assia willingly let her pet him, wipe him, and take him out. She knew how to make use of devotion and at the first glance she had seen the Amazon's readiness to turn herself into a nursemaid. George was one of those who have an obscure longing for a child. If one could have the child without the man! She was offered one all ready made, and he was a slip of Annette. Double joy, and a pretext for taking root in the house. Annette had to remind her that she had a home of her own, and a father whom she was neglecting. She spent hours sitting on a low seat at Annette's feet, or on the floor with the child. She spoke, or did not speak—it did not matter, all she wanted was to be there. Her attraction was extraordinary. She could not have explained it herself. And Annette was still inexplicable to her. If Annette saw George as she was (or pretty nearly) George never saw Annette except in the likeness of the romantic double she had made up for herself. And Annette knew it, she shrugged her shoulders at it, there was no way of disillusioning George, and it was not worth while, since, when all was said and done, the real Annette loved her. George asked no more. Annette had been captured by the girl's warm, sincere, dumb appeal. She could not cavil at her fine gift of herself without reserve! And as to George, it was enough for her that the gift was accepted. She needed Annette, she was happy when she was in her house, happy when Annette chanced to lay her hand on her, happy to breathe the same air. It was love, unformulated. For she was not very intelligent, she did not know her own inner world. She was like the unconscious expression of the homesickness which possessed her father, when she was born, thinking of his lost country. But in George the homesickness was assuaged. She had found that country again.

In her happy selfishness she forgot him who was now forsaken in his turn—her father, whom she never saw now except

---

## THE COMBAT

---

negligently at the evening meal, and who felt that she was absent, though sitting opposite him ; she was in a hurry to finish eating, so as to be off again, or to shut herself up, while she gloated over her days. In his study he could hear her laughing and talking to herself.

It was Annette who asked George to bring Julien to see her. But Julien received the request coldly. He was moved to the bottom of his heart. By a misfortune of his nature, due as much to his failings as to his qualities—to his reserve, his pride, his humility (the two contraries are often associated)—Julien was all but totally incapable of showing his deepest feelings. The greater his love, or emotion, the less he showed it, he became congealed. He was the first to suffer from it. Through it he had lost his chance of any intimate communion with his daughter, who was quite ready to confide in him. At this very time it would have been a joy to her to tell him all that was in her heart, all about her days spent with Annette. But just try to tell your joy to a wooden face that, when he saw that Annette's name or her image was about to come up in his daughter's chatter, seemed to protect itself by assuming a hostile coldness ! Though George knew very well what to think of it. So much the worse for him ! With the impatience of youth, she got tired of it, and sought for someone to pour herself out to. Lacking response, she talked to herself.

"It's between the two of us, my girl ! Warm up, warm up ! I've got a chilblain on my tongue from rubbing it against that icicle."

And week in week out Julien found fresh pretexts for not responding to Annette's invitation, without his daughter's insisting.

"No, don't let him come ! If he came with me he would spoil my pleasure."

Annette did not sit down to wait indefinitely. She knew her Julien of old. She put on her toque, one evening, and said to George



"I am coming back with you Is your father at home? I am going up to see him"

George exclaimed

"Whatever will he say?"

"Do you think he will turn me out?"

George laughed

"No! But poor old dear! Without a word of warning! He might have a fit!"

"If he was warned, he would run away, we should never be able to put our hands on him!"

"Ah, yes, you know the slippery eel!"

"Disrespectful daughter!"

"Respect be blowed! He bores us"

"Us?"

"You, me"

"Don't put me in the same boat! I respect everything"

"Respect everything? You? Oh! Come, come!"

"What do you mean—'Oh! Come, come'? I love and I fight—therefore I respect"

"The rules of the game?"

"No, the enemy One cannot fight well if one doesn't believe in him"

"By landing him an upper cut under the jaw! Yes, I agree with that"

"You believe in nothing but the game"

And very likely, of the two women, the one who only believed in the game was the readier to forget that it was a game But neither of them realized it

They went upstairs together George had her key She preceded Annette into the flat

"Father," she said, throwing open the door of his study, "I have brought your good friend"

If a thunderbolt had fallen, Julien could not have been more dumbfounded He had not even strength to rise Annette said

"Forgive me! Julien, your daughter is a demon. How-ever did you manage to make her?"

"I know very well what pattern I was cut on," said George. Annette pushed her towards the door.

"Now, my child, leave us in peace! Get out of this! And (I know you) don't go and put your ear to the keyhole."

George protested.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," said Annette, "you know a great deal more than you ought to already. Out with you! Be off! Do you think we are going to act the scene of the two old people in the *Arlesienne* for your pleasure?"

George, laughing, let herself be pushed out of the room. Annette came back to the writing-table where Julien still sat, petrified.

"My old friend," she said, holding out her hand, "are you frightened of an old woman?"

Julien suddenly pushed back his chair, and unable to speak, bent over her hand, and rested his forehead upon it. Annette sat down. He would never have thought of offering her a chair.

"Don't be angry with me for coming! I had to, since you would never have come to me. Would you now?"

"No," said Julien. "Never."

He had raised his head, and was looking at her with a feeble, still frightened smile of gratitude.

"Good! Let's say no more!" said Annette.

The two old friends gazed at each other. Both were studying the face they knew and the changes life had wrought in it. How many wrinkles on the house! But it had taken on a patina of shade and sunlight like the frontages of old Rome, which reflect the assaults of time and the august calm of undiminished resistance. They did not exchange their thoughts. Annette read the locked book, which would not open—less than ever—for he knew she was looking at him, and he had much to hide from her. She had no difficulty in guessing, and

she pitied the repressed soul, who had lived solitary all his life, and feared affection more than enmity for he was unused to it, and he had no weapons against it but flight

Annette broke the silence at last

"Thank you," she said, "for the young friend you have given me"

"She is yours," said Julien "The best thing I have"

"You have had a fine life" said Annette, with a grave smile

"I would not wish it to my worst enemy," he answered bitterly

"I would not wish it to anyone but you, for no one else would be worthy to bear it"

"What do you know of it?"

"I know it I know your struggles I have read your work What I have not read I have seen" (She closed her eyes) "I am proud of you"

He trembled

"I all that I am all I have become your work!  
I lay it at your feet"

Annette trembled in her turn

"What have I done for you?"

"You have made me"

The gulf of silence opened once more A warm torrent of emotion rushed into it George, pricking up her ears on the other side of the wall, said to herself

"Are they dead?"

Annette lifted a pair of moist shining eyes to Julien, whose look was fastened on hers like a faithful dog's, and her whole face was suffused by the rush of blood from her heart, but to Julien those flushed cheeks and that face were more beautiful than beauty And she said

"So we have not wasted *our* life"

Julien was about to answer

"What use has mine been to you?"

But seeing Annette's joy, he felt that he was ungrateful,

---

## THE COMBAT

---

he wanted to kneel before her, his moral ankylosis prevented him, and his misfortune he could see the ridiculous old man

He stammered

"If I have not spoilt *yours*—all sorrows, all defeats, and all the rest, is nothing—and all is well "

They smiled at each other, exchanging their grave and silent gratitude Then Annette got up, and said

"Enough happiness for one day !"

She went out On the threshold, he said

"And when is the next instalment ? "

She replied

"When you come and fetch it The door of the days is open once again "

### XXXVII

They met regularly The old friends had appointed hours for conversation, which were strictly reserved to them Though Julien had made the acquaintance of Marc, Vania and Assia, and very soon had his place in the family, he never thawed completely in their company, he grew stiff, Assia made him shy, and so even did Vania, he did not know how to talk to a child Marc alone could read deeper than the savant's thoughtful brow, and he was eager to decipher the enigma of his intrepid and austere mind But Julien was afraid of the other enigma, the searching scrutiny of this young man, whose strange preoccupations and bitter irony he could not understand, troubled him He took refuge with Annette, who understood as well as himself the weaknesses, and better than himself the greatness, of that sad soul, that proud soul, without need of explanations Even without speech, he was freed at her approach from the accumulated charge of his soul, like an electric current, and Annette was not overweighted but equilibrated by it it completed her

fright, and the water-line of the vessel was but the better assured. Thus by their finding each other again a secret law of their nature was fulfilled. The age of love was past, it was a question of more (and of less), the final chord of two beings, which closed the pre-established curve of each of the two destinies. And without words—more often at night, from one house to the other, as each lay thinking in bed—each gave thanks to the other, and each realized that he had never ceased to dwell in his friend's heart.

But the two dwellings were not equally full, and in Annette's Julien only occupied one room. Julien's house lacked furniture and inhabitants, apart from Annette and his daughter who had but a temporary camp there, it contained nothing but his books and his ideas—that dust and cobwebs!

Annette's house was full—full of the past—full of the present—and there were still rooms awaiting visitors who might arrive to-morrow—who would arrive. No, the game was not equal! It never can be. There would be no game, there would be no life without a winner and a loser, one who gives most and one who takes most. Julien gave most, having more to give, more affection to be disposed of. Annette could not dispose of the share she had given to others—or that she would give (for the future claims its share). Julien's share was good. He had to be content with it. If it was not sufficient for his hunger, it was his own fault—when Annette's heart was almost whole, he had let it escape him. He must be grateful for the portion she had saved for him. He was

But not without regret, for which he reproached himself, for the other shares which were not his, especially for that which a newcomer, a new friend, had appropriated without asking for it. Count Bruno.

That happy man—that man, happy though all the blows of fate had fallen on him—had only to present himself everywhere to be loved, "*Veni, vici*." He thought it quite natural. And everyone thought it natural as he did. All was

---

## THE COMBAT

---

pleasure on both sides. People did not have to wear out their teeth, as with Julien, biting through a hard rind, that made the gums bitter, to get at the almond. The rind was as good to eat as the almond. No doubt his lightness was half his charm, the other half being made up of affectionate kindness and natural attractiveness. He cast no shadow on his path. All the sorrows of life were reabsorbed in the light of his caressing blue eyes, which could not help being a little flirtatious to everyone. The old childlike man with his soft thick beard, which he stroked like a cat's back with his fine fingers, needed everyone's love and to love everyone. That did not prevent him from judging them with a disconcerting lucidity which went straight to the bottom and laid a finger on the sore point that was being hidden, but so gentle, so just, that the touch seemed a secret voluptuousness. And it established between the benevolent operator and the complaisant patient a bond of mysterious intimacy of which both held the key.

The only one of them all who did not lend herself to this game was the hard prickly chestnut Assia. She did not like "*gentleness, gentleness*"—men too gentle, beards too beautiful, hands too fine and too well cared for, and the glance that insinuated itself like a caress to the bottom of one's heart. She knew very well that he was good, that he was wise, that he saw far. But she did not care for that wisdom, for that goodness, nor to see far. "I see close, I see my Marc, good or bad, I take him as he is, he takes me as I am, he goes where I go, and I know where I am going." She could not prevent Bruno from reading her behind her shutters. But it made her vexed and angry. And he, kindly, pretended not to look, but he could not prevent himself, and he laughed in his scented beard at the little frowning cat face.

All the others were conquered—the child and George, Marc and Annette. To the measure of their needs, all felt the benefit of that optimism unaffected by life's catastrophes and blue-eyed reason. However irrational the optimism to which

tragic experiences gave the he in the depths of his heart, it was a relief from Julien's *other* clairvoyance, the dark view, the pessimism which holds out, stoical, indestructible, but with no joy of life, no spring. That optimism alone was efficacious, for it alone was vital—it responded to the deep laws of *natura naturans*, which wills to live, without regard for good or evil, suffering, or the futility of efforts, it willed to live, and it lived, despite moral and rational laws which are those of *natura naturata* of the logical man who is not wise enough to loose the thread of his distaff, of the man who thinks to the end—till he no longer lives. Bruno knew all about thought, his skilful fingers had no trouble in winding the skein thereof, but he knew how to listen to the song of the spinning wheel and, answering it from inside the house, the dream song, the siren. He had once been her victim, but now he had caught her in his nets, the siren of Sicily, she sang for his pleasure and that of his hosts, like a caged bird, and to those who listened, the song lightened the suffering of living. The bird did not hide that which caused suffering. It did not say

"That which is, is not"

It said

"That which is, is therefore it is beautiful. For it is beautiful to be!"

And its beautiful voice, like a violoncello, perhaps a little conscious of its beauty, illuminated everything, whether beautiful or ugly, like a ray on the blue sea at the foot of the rock of death. Scylla

It was that ray which had touched Marc's anxious brow. And the ray had rested on that young brow. They had been attracted to each other. At the first glance the wise old Sicilian had been struck by the pure and ardent disillusionment of that young face. This impassioned being was marked for death, he had already crossed the threshold. And Bruno was also touched by the great effort which he read in that

---

## THE COMBAT

---

tormented nature to liberate itself from the demons of violence and the selfishness of youth. He guessed those silent combats, better than the wife, better than the mother, and the irascible, hard, even cruel, proud, tyrannical, rapacious, unbridled young man, who broke the ribs of his instincts like little jaguars, captivated him by the very vigour of those instincts, and by that of the soul which had subdued them. He saw him going forward, with the recovery of a young athlete, towards a state of renouncement, the heroic and fragile harmony of which was to Bruno a moving spectacle. Because of it, he conceived for this child of twenty-five, a secret and singular veneration, which was shown by the manner in which he sometimes spoke to him, he gave way to him—which he did for no one else, not even to women except with a tinge of worldly courtesy which diminished the effect. He seemed to bow before a mysterious future. Perhaps he could not have expressed himself the sacrifice he foresaw, and the vision of an Isaac carrying the wood of his sacrificial pyre. And Annette, seeing Bruno, was troubled, she said to herself

“What do his eyes see?”

And she did not dare to ask him.

But Marc did not notice it. He was too taken up with the problem set him by his destiny. He played his part, he acted his play, scene by scene, without troubling himself to know the end of the tragedy. But he acted badly, because like the bad actors spoken of by Diderot, he was *too taken* by his part, he did not dominate it. And to get out of it, he needed rather Bruno's smile, which was new ground to him, than Julien's bitter vision, which was too like his own.

### XXXVIII

The first benefit he derived from his contact with the old Ulysses was the appeasement and the reconciliation with him—



self which the troubled soul felt entering, drop by drop. He had no need to confess the humiliation of the combats going on in his body and of the intruders that camped there, the horde of undesirable thoughts which he was not proud of harbouring. Bruno's half-closed eyes had sought them in their nest and, without seeming to touch them, had taken the frightened birds into the hollow of his affectionate irony. One day when Marc, without daring to say so, was tormenting himself with the memory of unavowable presences in his mind, Bruno, seeming not to listen to some rambling old tale which had nothing to do with the anxious man beside him, smilingly related a paradoxical Indian anecdote. It was about a worthy man who went to a hermit and begged him to become his guide. The sannyasin, after scrutinizing him, said

"My son, can you tell lies?"

"God forbid!" replied the good man. "I could never lie."

"Go and learn then," said the sage. "When you have learnt, you may come back."

For the wisdom of Thibet added, "*Inability is not virtue but impotence*."

"Ah! Good God!" cried Marc, "no one can accuse me of that!"

And that impudent Assia, who, in passing, had caught the remark and the answer on the wing, attested

"No, on that score there is nothing to reproach him with!"

Both men laughed. But when they were alone again, Marc said to Bruno

"It is not so much that I have to deal with lying, it is the smallest animal among my fauna, and I suppose you do not think it essential that I should fatten it! I would rather cultivate the six other capital sins. But all the others, and the riff-raff of those that are not called capital—they are the worst—the vermin."

"I will not go so far," said Bruno, stroking his silky beard, "as to repeat the saying of the old wives of your country (those of mine say the same) '*Lice are a sign of good health*'. But as far as the inner life is concerned, true wisdom is, perhaps, as my solitaries teach, not to destroy (destroy nothing!) but to transmute the substance of energies. And those of evil are a fortune, like those of good. He who has received them in his cradle is a mortal blessed by the gods."

"I am then," said Marc, "Curse them! I could have done without their presents."

"Young people are ungrateful," said Bruno.

But the paradoxical sentence went its way and found good soil in Marc's mind, to be understood and to fructify. He knew very well the vital worth of those energies to him, and that without them he would be weaker, and more helpless.

Another of the Thousands-and-One Tales of the "Grand Lama", as the irreverent Assia called Bruno, the question of King Milinda

"King Milinda asked Nagasena, 'Which of the two is the greater sinner: he who sins in ignorance, or he who sins knowingly?' 'He who sins in ignorance. For of those who take a bar of hot metal in their hands, which is burned worse, he who knows, or he who does not know? The worse burned is he who does not know.'"

Like a true Frenchman, and Annette's son, Marc could discern the red-hot bar. It was a question of intelligence to know how to take hold of it and use it. Woe to the "poor in spirit"! The kingdom of heaven is promised them. But in heaven's name, for our salvation, let the kingdom of earth be closed to them! "*Simplicity (alias silliness) is worse than crime,*" declared Assia. The wisdom of the Slavs, of India, and of France, all wisdoms, are in agreement. Don't be a fool! The good sense of nations is no fool anywhere.

The long combat which for years Marc had silently waged with his monsters, without mentioning it to his closest inti-

mates, was made easier by the proximity of his elder, who knew them without need of words, and who stroked their manes and tamed them without whip or riding boots. The harmony of the self with the world (that is still nothing!) the harmony of the self with the self, which Count Bruno had achieved, acted, as by osmose, upon Marc's tormented nature. It even seemed that the profound and alleviating meaning of his torments and renouncements was revealed to him, as though they were the ransom agreed upon "to liberate the pure humanity in oneself."

*" Pure humanity redeems  
All the crimes of humanity "*

It was from Bruno's lips that Marc had heard those beautiful lines, and the *Iphigenia* of Weimar, who was a favourite sister to the appeased Orestes of Messina.

And the problem of violence, which Marc was up against—the violence inseparable from combat and the action of which, even when most stripped of any will to violence, like Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, can never be disentangled from it (for what else but violence is the refusal of all co-operation by which we live—that pneumatic machine which pumps the receiver and asphyxiates?)—that cruelty which nature inflicts on our every gesture, our every breath, if we would live—was rendered more breathable to Marc's feverish lungs by his old companion's unexpected acceptance and serene irony. Bruno with an undeceived smile, evoked the strange notions of *service and compassion for one's neighbour*, which he had gathered among the snow-dust on the high plateaux of Asia. Man's reason, which everywhere is the best soap to wash his hands when they bear traces of mud, traces of blood, had managed to find a place for crime in the compassion preached by those pious solitaires. They had tried to persuade themselves that murder, a mere accident in the course of the

murdered man's reincarnations, might act, in certain cases, as a salutary shock and spur him into better ways. So it was a charity which saved the sinner from sinking deeper into his hell and gave him an opportunity to redeem himself.

Naturally, Marc was revolted—he fulminated against the "shavelings." Bruno defended them with an indulgence which was worse, for it implied (Hail to the ready hearer!) that between these crimes of compassion, and those of extortion which hem the lives of honest men, there was but the difference between a piece of money and its small change. In Society, as man has made it, it is very difficult to live without small change—without that change of crime which is called justice, and which disposes of the life of the unjust for the safety of the community. (Pious folk have added that their satisfaction might be complete. "For the salvation of the chastised!")

Bruno did not say that he himself had got out of that society. The "Path" taught by the lamaic directors of conscience goes beyond that first stage of "just or virtuous activity", its goal is the hostelry whose sign is "activity surmounted." One leaves *action* at the door and one finds within *being*, pure being, like the sun. That was the secret which Bruno never revealed, and from which he drew that reflected light of the summits which comforted other eyes. But he was careful not to trust Marc with the key, to a young man the hour has not yet come to taste what lies beyond action! It is a poison until a man has got beyond the line of the parting of the waters, from which he will descend the other slope towards the setting sun. Climb, my friend, climb and act! *Being* is at the end. But first, *do*!

He did not think, like Julien—"What is the good of doing? What is the good of being?"

There are two kinds of humanities (as they say in France, of magistracies) humanity "seated" and humanity "standing." Julien belonged too much, like his intellectual bureau-

cratic caste, to that which lives and dies sitting down And yet he had made heroic efforts to raise his thought ! With his thin arms he had projected it into action, like a rock But it had vainly shaken the walls of the old society it rebounded to him by the force of the impact, it fell back upon the man who had thrown it When he went to bed, he ruminated, overwhelmed

“ God ! how heavy humanity is ! ”

Yes, it is the cross of Golgotha It was beneath its weight that the Man-God fell, much more than that of the miserable cross of wood Julien was penetrated by the suffering, the injustice, the demoniacal folly of humanity, past, present, and to come The man's vast culture was impregnated by the perpetual obsession of man as executioner and victim And it was terrible to bear it alone For he was noble enough not to wish to share the weight with another Annette alone could, with a glance, probe his suffering and ease it He had not Bruno's too comfortable resource, of lightening himself of humanity in the illuminated dream of an oceanic Cosmos Julien was still attached to the old field where the flock of men is penned, the earth, he shared their destinies He could only liberate himself by stripping himself of all the illusions by which they live From the day when the eyes of this former believer had been unsealed he had dug down to the bottom (there is no bottom !) of negation He could not now even conceive the idea of Christian immortality, which had cast a spell over half his life And as he knew those Christian eyes, and their vision, better than anyone, he savoured bitterly the puerile avidity which wears itself out in trying to preserve ephemeral substance and form for all eternity Nor was he any more bewitched by the idols of the mind and heart science, art and love He saw their limitations too well and their fumes—opium fumes He had a destructive demon sealed within him, whose fits of lugubrious buffoonery were known to himself alone But they were restrained by his

native goodness, which feared to wound the faith and hope of the weak, and by a famished, unacknowledged craving for tenderness, of which life had deprived him. And at last he had that friendship which he had killed for more than twenty years, and in which he had just discovered the denied meaning of his life—Annette. He saw very well that through that door were re-entering him, with muffled footsteps, faith and hope and all the illusions which had gone out by other doors. He knew it well. But he abdicated in full consciousness. He made himself humble in order to have something to believe, love and venerate. Even so, in order to live, does the soul imprisoned behind the bars of reason will that its roots should pass through them, to drink the blood of the earth.

## XXXIX

That great silent love that walled itself in did not escape Annette's inner sight. It would have been less appealing if it had spoken. Sunshine emanated from it between the walls. Poor Julien always kept his centre of warmth hidden. He only let the light pass through, the spirit which gives light without heat. But that concentrated heat penetrated the brick walls against which Annette rested her hands, and she felt the muffled warmth of that old quivering heart. What tenderness was in him, and what sadness! How completely he was in her power!

In those days Annette's heart was divided between her two old friends. If she had merely followed her inclination she would have leant towards Bruno. Bruno had more to give her. But she had more to give Julien. And for a woman of her sort, the strongest need is to give.

Certainly it would have been sweet to let herself be lulled by the grand dream, rich in light, the smiling wisdom, and

caressing affection of Count Chiarenza A woman's soul, weary of a life of solitary struggles, wounded and bruised, would have found it good to abandon itself to the guidance of that quiet, steady companion But how resist the silent appeal (she alone could hear it) of that other, who had been the friend of her youth, whose virile effort to free himself from the chains of the world in which he had been fast bound had, without in any way diminishing his intrepid lucidity, left him bereft of happiness! Too disillusioned and too lonely to attain it by his own efforts, too proud and too humble to aspire to it by the help of the only being who was for him the bearer of hope and joy, he stood beside her in silence, melancholy and grateful that she should be willing to tolerate his presence and grant him even a modest place among her friends But Annette discerned the stifled entreaty in the depths of his repressed heart, and she was caught by the touching awkwardness of the man's arms which did not dare stretch themselves towards her

She was troubled by the state of her heart, between these two men, equally dear to her At their age, it could no longer be a question of love (Why?) and the word friendship was an insufficient frame feeling went beyond it Yet Annette wished to keep within it She did not admit her right to go beyond it She told herself that she was a mother and a grandmother, that the cycle of her life was completed, that she belonged to her family But she blushed to acknowledge that her life went on its way, and that the cycle was far from closed The family did not confine her, and itself constituted an independent cycle However sincere her children's love for her, they formed a little world apart, without her She was the beloved guest, but the guest comes and goes She lacked a home of her own She forbade herself to think of it But she could not prevent herself, in hours of weariness, from feeling a longing for it, which she condemned or punished with irony Would she never learn to grow old? The worst

---

## THE COMBAT

---

folly, that which the young can pardon least is to keep a brain of twenty under hair growing grey !

She endeavoured to turn that unused dream energy from the heart stream to the mind stream—the mind that acts. She was very audacious in it. She surpassed her two friends in that.

### XL

The two men, Julien and Bruno, so brave and lucid, never carried their action to the end. They might be carried away for an hour, by a flight of imagination, which flung them into revolt, into a refusal of despotism or falsehood. And in their conscience they remained resistant to injustice and to the senselessness of the social state. But, generally, their resistance remained at the threshold of their consciousness. It only crossed it when forced from its entrenchments. And even then did not respond to the attack by a counter-attack, it restricted itself to opposing its indestructible "No !"

*"Ich kann nicht anders"* "They did not strive by every means to impose their "otherwise" (*anders*) upon the world.

They belonged to that grand old generation of intellectuals, whose activity was poisoned by thought. Even the most generous were inclined to attribute to their thought a privileged position from which, too often, they never moved. When they had thought, all was said, the world might dance round in a ring, they looked on. The vaster the field of their thought, the more infinitesimal seemed that little ring, it was not worth wasting one's time over. Julien and Bruno, in whom heart balanced intelligence, and who, different from the majority of their great colleagues of the mind, could not succeed in losing interest in the sufferings of the world and its disorderly efforts, might very well be drawn into the ring for a moment, but they very soon got out of it again. They returned to their own activities. Julien had raised his cry



both in and outside the *mêlée*, and his pitiless sarcasm continued, at long intervals, to relieve itself by demonstrating the falsity of the oparalogisms upon which Society rested. But he did not follow the cruel birds of his mind in their flight, and that mind was apter at denouncing and destroying abuses, than at reconstructing. Bruno, in whom instinct was stronger had many times taken part in action for social service, and, carried away by his humour and his proud old Norman blood, he had hurled defiance at the oppressors. But that also was rather a revenge of the mind against stupidity triumphant. He did not care so much about victory (victory, defeat, are but passing episodes in the long film which is being unwound!) as to laugh in the victor's face. His laugh would never have rung so clear as in facing guns, or before the gibbet of execution. He would have been sorry to let their violence draw him into violence. He had done so in brief fits of anger, but he blamed himself for it—Julien had not even that much to blame himself for, his fits of anger hurt no one but himself—he repressed them.

For themselves, both deliberately kept apart from violence. With Bruno this was due to a sort of aristocratic disdain. His intelligence understood it—but in others. He was in no hurry to be like them. Violence seemed to them both an assault upon liberty of spirit—they would not be accomplices in it. Thus, they had complaisantly accepted the doctrine of Tolstoy and Asia, which prescribes Non-acceptance without violence. Not that their study of European men had convinced them of the efficacy of such tactics in every case. But the real combat, for them, being in the field of spirit, the main point, to them, was that the spirit should be saved. "*Salvavi animam meam*"

It was long since that had been enough for Marc! Even the salvation of the souls of others no longer sufficed if their bodies were not also saved. The miserable body, that rag, that life of a day, so lightly spoken of by those "*idealists*" who are not

## THE COMBAT

forced to worry about it, for they are not so badly provided for ! No ! the body first ! And let us call it by its name, its name of glory and scorn the belly Despise it, beautiful souls ! The famished belly, the belly which makes life, the belly from which the tree of Jesse springs—the root Nourish it ! First conquer hunger, poverty, social misery

The soul will flower, if it pleases, at the top of the tree I rake the earth at the foot of the tree and I manure it It is from that manure that God, or Man-God, will be born Neither Julien, nor Bruno would have contradicted it Bruno knew the hard saying of the tender Francis of Assisi of India<sup>1</sup> "No religion for empty bellies !" In fact, he had conformed his life to it for he had despoiled himself of nearly all he possessed to fill them

But his part in social action stopped there Bruno did not pretend to oblige others to do the same And if his judgment was clear enough to see that the system of capitalist compression must necessarily lead to explosion, he did nothing to hasten or retard it He saw the bloodshed too clearly, and did not want to dip his beautiful hands in it (They had been obliged to search the ruins of the wrecked town and the remains of rotting flesh The dreadful stench still clung to his fingertips ) He knew, moreover, that he could prevent nothing ! Social fatality is as blind and ineluctable as *terremoti*

This too clear realization of what is fated, this too much knowledge, weighs upon the action of intellectuals, even the freest and bravest They are like spectators who have previously read the play being acted, it is played without them, the actors have only reached the crisis, when they have got to the end

Marc was still at the crisis, and the blossom of action engrossed him more than the fruit He preferred Assia's hands that did not fear to dirty their nails with it to Bruno's too white hands All he wanted of his great elders, was to learn whether he was on the right road—the royal road of great Destiny

<sup>1</sup> Ramakrishna

And that was exactly what they could tell him, and they did tell him "*Via Sacra*" That is the great highway, straight and direct, of the legions It leads to the goal, by combat And both men, Julien and Bruno, were in agreement not to shake the strength of soul and legs of the young combatant It was his path It was his law

Marc's law led him out of his clan Could he be said to belong to a clan? He did belong to one! He was a Western, he loved his France, his France north of the Loire, with its pale blue rather ashen sky, its earth fair and rosy like the flesh of its daughters, its horizons, woods and hills, its rivers with their nightingales, its clear speech, and its smile of the *fabliaux* In other days, he would have been happy (so he thought) like the rivers of France in their beds But those rivers, the nearest, those in which he recognized his water and current—Annette, Ruche—had themselves come out of them *Per non dormire* One slept too well in those valleys, where the fishermen grew hypnotized over their floats

And, despite himself, he also belonged to the intellectual caste, he had their mental needs, their mania for logic, the pride of the *élite*, a hundred times swallowed in vain But all his experiences of the last few years had proved to him that they could not be depended upon! It was not so much a question of intelligence as of coming to action There were many among them who saw the situation as clearly as he did They even saw what ought to be done But as to doing it, they would not have raised their little finger Some, because, as beseemed good French officials, their knowing and cowardly prudence mistrusted everything which might trouble their rest, their sleepy course (their jog-trot) towards honours and salaries those who had reached the top had no further interest in moving Others, because, more or less consciously, they were afraid of upheavals their respectable *bourgeois* habits might, at a push, have admitted an order different from that in which they dwelt, but they could not bear the idea of removal,

---

## THE COMBAT

---

which would upset their furniture and papers. Revolution only pleased them a hundred years later, when one had settled down again. And yet how could one find a new house, when one knows that the old shanty is condemned? For many of them did know it. But they said to themselves, in order to push aside the painful picture, the inevitable invasion of their retreat by the heavy feet and clumsy hands of the furniture removers.

"Bah! it will last our time!"

The everlasting timid refrain, even in the parties which were theoretically preparing the Revolution, the socialists and the *bourgeois* reformers.

"To-morrow! to-morrow! You will make the Revolution to-morrow, when we, your elders, are no more."

And was it not the last blow, the fresh proof of the congenital impotence of the intellectuals, that these two elders, Julien and Bruno, whose independence, disinterestedness, and absolute scorn of danger Marc loved and respected, did nothing, would do nothing, to take part in the necessary action! Nothing but think! Sometimes speak. Write, if need be, if their opinion was asked. Then they expressed it clearly enough. But they would take good care not to impose it—even when it was a question of saving the very people whom they would have had to compel. Social action was heavy with chains which they no more cared to bear themselves than to impose on others. These free spirits had forgotten the elementary obligations of agricultural labour. To make the wheat grow, the ground must first be cleared, freed from stones, the thickets burned, and after that one must press heavily on the plough-share and drive the furrow straight and long and deep. The "*august gesture of the sower*" is not enough. We must use force, force the resisting earth, force the oxen straining under the yoke, force our muscles, force our hearts.

---

## THE COMBAT

---

### XLI

Marc began by sifting the fine sayings of his elders, I mean those of the only ones whose life forced from him an esteem certain of never being deceived

The first rule no longer to take into account the great principles, the "categorical imperatives" good for all time and in all places, the abstract, august, undisputed eternal truths They apply to everything They apply to nothing In a perpetually changing world, a truth which never changes is a lie, or worse to worthy folk incapable of discerning the lie, it is *nothing*

The real is true and the first law of honesty is to observe it exactly, and deduce from it its clear, virile and concrete rules of judging and acting—not the one without the other And not to-morrow, or at all times, but at this time and immediately—here, on this ground, on which one of my feet rests solidly and the other, raised in walking, is about to find a fresh point of support

"I see the ground I see the to-day of humanity, this real world of exploitation and carnage, delivered over to the great birds of prey by the fattening ruminants of the *bourgeoisie* who pasture on its old field, which is becoming exhausted I see it delivered up by the circus animals of intelligence and by the mangy-necked dogs of the Press I see this despoiling of the world, so overwhelming and beyond measure, in the subjection of the War years and the disorganization which followed, that the unworthy *conquistadores*, hardly one of whom rises beyond the level of ill-bred mediocrity, falling short in their victory, have been unable to organize it In a few years, they have only succeeded in upsetting the economy of the world, the compass of which has gone crazy, and accumulating mountains of gold and riches of a useless nature—worse than useless, devastating—on the two ruined continents I see war, wars in

---

## THE COMBAT

---

preparation or in progress, everywhere, under cover of the sinister buffoonery of Geneva the League of Nations I see, under the shameful farce of Disarmament, the monstrous increase of war budgets, even in nations that have been bled white, which do not devote a tenth of their remaining resources to the upkeep of their own house—public works, bread for the unemployed, education Everything by which men live, all the blood of others, flows to destruction everything to the guns! I see destruction of vital values everywhere—wheat burned in countries where millions of beings are dying of hunger ” (And this thought, which threw Marc into a state of exasperated revolt, scarcely ruffles the bewildered indifference of thousands of worthy people too selfish and unfeeling to react against what does not graze their precious skin ) “ Everywhere I see Fascism used, or held in reserve, to protect the unjust order I see the dreadful immorality of the world’s condition, which is only equalled by its criminal insanity

“ And that condition does not depend upon a few individuals, a few groups, Fascisms of the fist or finance, which it would be relatively easy to strangle It is indissolubly bound up with the whole capitalist order of this degenerate *bourgeoisie* Incrusted in it, like vermin in a fleece, are not only the crimes of the present, but the crimes of to-morrow each necessitating the other The directors, the profiteers, are at the same time the dependants of their system, the slavists are slaves, they can no longer free their necks from the pillory of business Everything is business, all that holds them, and all they hold becomes crime For when business is bad, there is no way out for the lords and servants of business, but the destruction of the values of life, the productive forces, which are in their way, and the constraint of the human instruments, of the proletarian masses, by Fascisms and wars! Wars—war, of all business the most enormous and the most juicy, juicy with gold, juicy with blood, for the magnates, manufacturers, traffickers, of the metallurgic and chemical industries, the monopolies and Trusts of heat,

---

## THE COMBAT

---

cotton and stocks of accumulated merchandise, and it is juicy with dividends and coupons for the *bourgeoisie* and their "shares" (the only thing in which they glory, these sons of the great *bourgeois* of '89!) The rest of the juice goes down the throats of the starvelings, the quill-drivers and venal thinkers, ever on sale to those who can pay!

*"War, Commerce and Piracy  
Are three in one, consubstantial"*<sup>1</sup>

"The name of the Trinity is Capitalism. No other alternative than to destroy it, or accept! The pacifism of Geneva is a traitor to *real peace*. Its true object and its effect is to benumb the inert nations, so as to deliver them up. *Real peace* demands that the masters of war be eliminated. They will only be so after the assault upon their Bastilles. Those of Russia have already fallen. When will it be the turn of ours? Are we ready?"

All over the world the working-class masses, better informed than the rest of the people, threaten and agitate, but the menace is still unorganized. Too many elements of disunion, which their enemies know how to manipulate, are used to neutralize their energies. The mortal enmity between the parties which boast the same socialist principles, and, like disputers over the Talmud, insultingly oppose each other with their commentaries on texts and their divergences in tactics, the artful, suspicious, short-sighted leaders foment these divisions, which allow them to carry on their advantageous part of undertakers of the revolution, with no risk of bringing it about during their lifetime. The proletarian masses themselves are captured without much difficulty by the capitalist factory of death and oppression. It is only a question, in times

<sup>1</sup> *"Krieg, Handel und Piraterie  
Dreieinig sind sie, nicht zu trennen"*

(Goethe *Faust*)

of unemployment, when millions of workers throughout Europe are dismissed, of opening to them new factories of engines of war and industrial and chemical products, for two purposes. The most revolutionary workers rush into them, and by a savage irony, assist in forging the death which will sweep away their brothers of other nations, or which will rebound upon themselves with the poisoned breath of the engines which their ironmasters sell, without scruple, to hostile nations. And the *bourgeoisie*, aware of these highly treasonable markets, scarcely show any indignation. When these sales bring millions in gold into the coffers, no one cares about the millions in blood which they draw out, and the ironmasters, with German names, who preside over French destinies, the undertakers of the world's assassination, have become a French glory! *Noli tangere* them! The workers, instead of strangling them, accept from their honoured apache hands, bread kneaded with the blood of others. They say

“‘What do you expect? We must eat. We are not heroes!’

“‘We are not heroes?’ So be it! Neither you nor I. But we can become so, when we will—when we must! And we must. The choice now lies between two deaths! either to die, soiled and enslaved, or to die free and avenged. To die that the men of to-morrow may live, delivered! Such is the example set by the phalanxes of the Revolution sacrificed in the combats of the U S S R. And since neither the *bourgeois* classes of the West, nor their illustrious intellectuals, those of yesterday, can be depended upon to follow that example, let us appeal to those of to-morrow, who will not plead their privileges of intellect to escape the responsibility and risk of action, to those who will not deny their brotherhood with the proletarian worker! Like the Third, in '89, the Fourth Estate which was nothing, is determined to be everything. And it will be. Nothing is possible without the organized energies of the working-classes. Upon their shoulders, and upon their



heads—intelligence and strength—their will to devote themselves, depend the life and fate of the world And first, let these millions of breasts learn to cry, with unanimous, implacable decision, the 'No!' that will break the order of death, and hamstring the murderous powers Let strike and revolt answer the threats of imperialist wars! Strike in the forges Strike in factories Strike in transport Labour shakes the burden from its shoulders and says

"'No! You who claim to command me, now try to act without me! You could not even exist without me Like the species of exploiting ants, you can only eat what Labour has disgorged for you Capitulate! Go back into the ranks! And re-conquer, by work, the right to eat!'

"There is only one sacred cause to-day The cause of Labour, alone All the rest, faith and culture, pure reason, social state—all must be rebuilt, from the beginning, upon the unshakable foundations of organized Labour But such organization in the thick of battle calls for the strength of Hercules One is not Hercules, far from it!" thought Marc, glancing with pity at his thin arms "But we will do what we can I will give all I have—my life—and more than I have—my death, if necessary—all my powers of devotion If only there were a thousand of us—no more—in the world, who would do as much, that nucleus would be enough to make the formless mass agglutinate itself with it, and we would become the moving mountain"

## XLII

Thus Marc had made his decision to consecrate himself to the great cause, to prepare himself for the coming social struggle, by gathering together all his own forces to serve it, and by contributing, from that moment, to its organization

This was, in fact, the most difficult part For a young

intellectual like himself had some trouble in finding his proper place in the boundaries of the labour world, in which he had not taken root, and among mediocre politicians, whose vociferous demagoguery, which had lost the art of speaking, listened to nothing but its own din, and did not trouble to reason. The Western proletariat had missed formation by the harsh discipline of a revolutionary party which, like that of Russia, had gone through half a century of proscriptions, hangings and bloody experiments, a hundred times foiled, and a hundred times renewed, and of meditation in exile. The Commune of Paris was only a brazier. It devoured everything pell-mell, and left nothing but its red stain on the clouds, and its smoke. The French workers had no experience, as yet, of the social combats in which they were about to engage. No doubt they could only acquire it at the price of more than one disaster, like Revolutionary Russia before 1905. With this essential difference that the U S S R now existed as an example and support. They must learn from the strategists of Moscow, but with knowledge of the resources proper to the country, its mental needs and the tenacious attempts of its old Revolutionary parties—from its wounded in campaigns of the past, and from its young syndicates. Marc, henceforth, applied himself to the task. He was still only a pupil. But he tried to make up for lost time. He must be ready for the day when the forces of action would be reckoned up.

Julien and Bruno looked on. They read his intentions. And they did nothing to dissuade him. They were free enough to understand and approve such intentions in a young man craving as Marc did action without compromise. But they had no wish to imitate him. The incurable vice of that generation of most sincere intellectuals, was that of seeing too far ahead to see well close at hand. One, whoever the actors might be, could see *chimæra* with its blinded eyes, the bleeding *Œdipus* of the Tragedy. The other saw the play tragic or comic mask, and under it the same face of the panther-eyed

Dionysos, of the Dream of Life, crowned with pampas Though they might be caught in the play for a moment, they preferred to sit and look on Marc vexed himself in vain trying to make them rise from their seats He broke himself against the eyes that affectionately approved him, but to which he was only a living spectacle If only he had had to strive against them But not at all They seemed to say

"Go on, my boy ! You are on the right road Go forward on your way !"

But they stood aside from the way They furnished him with arguments that he should act according to his own law and not according to theirs They even helped him to solve in his own fashion, and not theirs, the problems that puzzled him, such as that of violence To the young man, there seemed a kind of irritating indulgence in this way of approving and being unwilling to accompany him

He said to Bruno with vexation

"I can't tolerate your disdain for what I am doing or want to do"

"I feel no disdain, my dear boy I say Bravo !"

"Why not Encore ? You say it as though you were speaking to a circus acrobat who has just done his turn"

Bruno laughed and said

"I have done mine, my friend"

Marc, taken aback, seized his hand

"That's true I beg your pardon ! You have had a heavy task But if mine is just, if you approve it, why not take your share in it ?"

Bruno said

"I am in the reserve now and you are on active service Each in his turn !"

"The combat," said Marc, "has need of every fighter"

"Your fight," said Bruno, "is only an episode in the great battle You only take in a part of the field Don't bother

about the rest of the army Every corps has received its orders Carry out yours Forward ! ”

“ And where is the chief ? ” asked Marc

“ The chief is ahead,” said Bruno, “ as at the bridge of Arcola Catch up with him ! ”

“ And you leave us on the tottering bridge and do not follow us ? ”

“ Who knows ? ” said Bruno with his subtle smile “ Perhaps you will find us on the other bank ! ”

## XLIII

Yes, that was the mystery that while refusing to take part in the active campaigns, Bruno, like Julien, never stuck behind with the baggage wagons of the army These two men, so different, the Democritus and Heraclitus of legend, had this in common, that both having escaped by opposite ways from the enclosure of action which surrounds and defends the City of Man, both were to be found on guard in the forward marches, wherever the most dangerous battles were in progress And from their by no means sheltered observation posts under the cross fires of both camps, they never grew weary of studying beings in action Their exact and well-informed curiosity could determine the slope, and their minds prepared the bed of the current, in advance For such is the nature of the Western soul Though it may have found the door of escape into dream, or into nothingness, though it doubts everything and its reasons for action, whether it believes or disbelieves, the Western soul marches on, it marches on “ *E pur si muove* ” It does not allow itself the too easy resource of immobility, in melancholy or in the voluptuousness of doubt or faith Bestriding its “ *Que sais-je ?* ” as well as its *Credo*—like Rosinante, and Sancho’s donkey—the Western soul journeys on indefatigably And

that untiring going is part of the course of worlds in the eternal horology To go on, whether one wishes it or not, is to have faith And such a faith is equal to that of prayer Prayer is the path that leads to Being But going on is the path made by the feet of Being It is by motion that it marks its trajectory on the blackboard of darkness

And it was by this invincible faith in life and motion that Bruno and Julien, without belonging, or wishing to belong to any party, had necessarily to co-operate with Marc's party The two men were experts in reading, as by the Rontgen rays, in the vast body of humanity, where life lay, and where death And their infallible sense made its choice where life lay, there was their country They found it in all those—individuals or nations—who, in the tragic "*Die and become!*" of the old world, were participating in the great Mutation—the pioneers of new sciences, new morals, new societies—all those who break the cincture of prejudices and abuses (or who let it out a notch or two, said Bruno, ironically)

The child grows, he needs a larger size The child-world of the century of wars and universal Revolutions was bursting all the hooks and eyes, all the sheaths, gods, laws and frontiers which had hitherto fitted his limbs In rising, had he not struck his head, burst through the ceiling of his old solar Universe, and put his head through the myriads of the Milky Way, and swept with his eye, a whole armful of other universes, the fiery tresses, the drops of sperm of the great Spiral Nebulæ, like jellyfish at the bottom of the sea? How could the spirit be dismayed by the tottering of Society, the blows of the battering-ram, which all the world over sapped the standards of the ancient cities? Even this *bourgeois* who had been fed on the traditions of classic Catholic France, even this nobleman of Sicily whose beard was perfumed with Græco-Latin culture, did not seek the past in the future, but in the past the new-born future, the young Hercules who strangled serpents even in his cradle They did not look askance at the adult

Hercules who was cleansing the Steppes of Scythia with his club They were curious as to the Labours of the Russian Revolution, and followed them with a sympathy which did not exclude criticism, but it was that of aged friends, who regretted that they could not take their part in the suffering, and even in the youthful errors, engendered by a new Truth, a new Life And sensing their regret, Marc felt the joy of being young, and able to enter that Promised Land while they must remain on the threshold It was a new feeling to him Hitherto, he had not greatly appreciated his good fortune the Promised Land and youth had seemed to him a land accursed When one of his elders praised it to him, when they said "You are lucky to be twenty!" he had felt like slapping their faces, he thought it was a horrible joke Or what sort of idiots were they? But these two men, who had so lavishly paid their share of sorrows to life that they regretted that they had nothing more to give, they had a right to speak! And he had none to sulk before the table, at the beginning of the meal

His Assia did not sulk before it, but she could not have said why, her sound teeth could have chewed anything, good or bad, her hunger for life and action cared nothing for reasons But Marc was very glad that they were offered him for intelligence with him was a motor as strong as instinct, and that motor must be fed However great his craving for action, however ready he might be to hold his life cheaply, what strength it gave to action and what joy to be able to persuade himself that this world, this world of the present time, which would perhaps take his life, was worth the gift, was worthy of the sacrifice! That was what Bruno, as if in response to his secret desire, gave him, without appearing to do so, when he talked with Julien of the great Epoch "Which?" "Ours, of course! That in which we suffer, that which makes and unmakes us, and which we make, which we build, humble masons of the gigantic plan In the confusion of the work-

yard, and the wearing out of millions of sacrificed workers' lives, as in the days of the Pharaohs, we do not see the Pyramid arising—the prodigies of the spirit that surround us, the miraculous discoveries and conquests of science, the flaring up again of the religious and revolutionary soul, the resurrection of ancient races laid in the grave, of India and China, and the great leaders, who incarnate in their consciousness the heroic peoples—the Sun-Yat-Sens, the Gandhis and the Lenins ”

From his intercourse with his two friends, Marc drew a deep appeasement, a tranquillity as to his foundations Bruno communicated to him, by osmosis, his intuition (which Marc had no time to verify by experience) of Being in motion, and he inspired him with his confidence in the march of the world towards unity, through the unceasing *mêlée*. Marc had the feeling that there existed, behind the curtain of chaos, an eternal harmony, a far-off music of the spheres, where the antinomies were resolved. He perceived it in lightning flashes. It was enough to prevent him from ever being submerged in the darkness again, whatever might befall. The army could hurl itself into the battle. Its rear was assured.

### XLIV

But its van? But the forefront of the battle? It was clear that Marc had no time to resolve all his antagonisms of mind in the *mêlée*. Action had no time to wait. Action catches. Once caught, it is impossible to free oneself! Nothing of oneself can be reserved! Each movement requires thought. Action demands all the forces of the mind when one is face to face with the enemy. He who lets a particle be distracted risks death, risks much more, risks the ruin of his party and his cause. Hasten, therefore, to think, before the trumpet sounds the charge! “*Es muss*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

sein        " That which must come, must come    And it can only come by means of our arms    The "*It must be*" is "*I must be*"    We are Destiny !

Now Destiny cannot be fulfilled to-day (no thinking man can possibly escape this knowledge) save by the unchaining of elementary forces, a wave of the depths, a tidal wave that sweeps everything away    Marc was not permitted to ignore it, he foresaw, he saw as if already engaged in them, the ferocity of the social struggles which were preparing, which were already going on in a part of Europe, and the fearful menace of the Asiatic nationalisms, drunk with vengeance and unruly, whose fist is raised above Europe    His burning hand already touched the fist, the claw, the terrible era on which the world was about to enter when the flood-gate of the Revolution opened    How decide upon it without anguish ? Bruno contemplated these cyclones with serenity, because he saw in them a phase of the Necessity which leads the worlds and which his spirit was content to contemplate    But Marc had taken upon himself the full responsibility of all that Destiny from the moment that he decided to enter it    And come what might, he had not left himself the right to evade it    Thebards were cowardice

He was now resolved to serve the army of the oppressed, which must break the old order of social injustice, at any post his orders assigned to him    The new injustices and sufferings which the combat must needs cause he knew to be inevitable, therefore necessary, it was necessary, therefore, that he should participate in them, he had no right to wash his hands of them and say to others

" Dirty yours ! I have nothing to do with it "

Better to take their crimes upon himself than to repeat Pilate's gesture ! He must accept his share in these sufferings, not only endured, but caused    And this was intolerable to him    He did not speak of it to anyone, even those dearest to him    It was useless    No one could decide for him, nor



---

## THE COMBAT

---

turn aside the weight of his destiny. He accepted it. He made no further attempt to dispute the order. He saw, with shrinking heart, but resolved, the hour of action approaching, heavy with all its overwhelming necessities. But in his heart, he addressed to that destiny—that dark power which drags us on, like the rotation of a world, in the darkness—a passionate supplication.

That in serving it, at his post in the battle, he might be called upon to shed no blood but his own, that he might not add to the pinnacle of suffering that rises higher from age to age, that his own suffering might be offered, as ransom!

He knew too well, hiding his secret fear from himself, that once caught by violence he would sink into it like an hallucinated Macbeth.

### XLV

A sudden brutal incident gave him a taste of that delirium.

His name had definitely emerged from obscurity. He could no longer be ignored. The manifest support of Julien Davy, whose moral (and still more, academic!) authority was established in the learned world, the support of the Leagues, of which Julien and Bruno were members, forced the public to listen to him. And the experience of the young combatant, precociously ripened by that communicated to him by his great elders, directed his blows to the exact spots where the capitalist Colossus was vulnerable—straight at the irresponsible corsairs of industrial finance who forced the hands of governments, and held the levers of command, at the men of the forges and cannons, straight at the Trusts that captured the Press and enslaved opinion! From the moment when the assault was no longer dissipated in vague ideologies, but attacked the heads of the real enemies, groups and individuals specifically named, men like Marc Rivière became a "public danger", and were at once in peril.

The implacability of their attacks attracted dangerous allies in the very ranks of those who rowed in the galleys of the proconsuls of the blast furnaces—the malcontents, the rebels, workmen, engineers, who came to reveal the secrets of shameful bargains, the criminal delivery of engines of murder to foreign powers, friends or enemies of to-day or to-morrow (What does it matter so long as they pay ! ) Sometimes they were opponents of Marc's opinions, nationalists, patriots, but indignant at the rascally internationalism of their sharks of industrial Committees they handed over the treasonable documents to Marc—but among these rebels *provocateurs* might creep in who betrayed both sides. The ground was burning under foot, and all the risks were deadly. The proconsuls, attacked and undermined, began to take the first steps. They could have no further illusion as to the possibility of conquering the adversary by the usual means of trickery, money, flattery or profits. Some day or other he would have to be eliminated. And there was no lack of means. The most discreet were the best. But they excluded none. There were renewed terms of imprisonment, by which for some imprudent speech, promoted to treason against the country, Martyrs might be buried. There was the trap of riots got up by the police, into which it could be arranged for clumsy agitators to fall. There was also, if necessary, the foul blow, the stray bullet, the leaded cane, at meetings, or at their door, or even (Good gracious, an accident can so easily happen ! ) on a solitary walk in some lonely place. It was not necessary that the "accident" should take place on reserved shooting ground, on French soil. the unfortunate mischance might happen, here or there, in any country. fatality knows no frontiers, especially when one knows how to direct it. As Internationals were all the fashion, the rebels should not have them all, the forces of order, the stranglers, should have theirs ! Even if they could not agree among themselves, they would agree against the common enemy. Men of honour

---

## THE COMBAT

---

did not refuse to do each other these little services, one good turn deserved another. Under such conditions the chase was not a very fatiguing pleasure. One had only to sit down, on the watch, and wait for someone else to bring down the quarry. From that moment Marc Rivière was marked. They were in no hurry, they kept an eye on him. Nothing would be lost by waiting!

Neither he nor those around him were sufficiently aware of the danger. They knew quite well that the danger existed. But they did not envisage it as something definite and close at hand. To them it was a vague cloud on the horizon, there would be time to safeguard oneself! The moral nobility of Juhen and Count Chiarenza obscured their sight, though they were forewarned. And as to Assia, her ardour in the game, and the excitement of action, made her a little too oblivious of the risks run by her partner. Annette, haunted by Timon's end, was the only one who felt anxiety, but it was confused and intermittent. She did not venture to speak of it, knowing that they would take no notice and would jeer at her pusillanimity. Moreover, Marc and Assia left her very incompletely informed as to the dangerous steps their campaign compelled them to take, she was only obscurely aware of the danger, and she was more preoccupied by Marc's health, of which he took no care, exhausted by fatigue and passions, than by dangers from without, she would have liked to tear him away from his feverish activities and force him to take a few months' rest. But neither he nor Assia would hear of it.

And so the cloud continued to grow heavier until an accidental discharge disclosed the extreme tension of the atmosphere and gave Annette unexpected assistance in taking Marc away from it, at least for a limited space.

Marc and Assia participated in the international campaign organized annually by the *Secours Rouge Internationale*, at about the date of the day of the combat of the 18th March. They had linked with the commemoration of the Paris

Commune the action of proletarian solidarity with all revolutionary political prisoners throughout the world, and they were endeavouring to mobilize public opinion in defence of colonial peoples oppressed by the imperialism of great States. In those years, in every part of the world, in Indo-China, China, Syria, and Egypt, in Morocco, in the Malay Archipelago and the Congo, in Samoa, in Nicaragua, in South America and Cuba, rebellion flared up, was savagely repressed, but still blazed up again from the embers, and threatened to carry the flame at a bound over oceans and deserts, like a forest fire. More than once Marc had denounced the preponderating part played by the great industrial combines in the wars of colonial conquest, and he had published documents upon the secret supplies of arms and ammunition sent by the masters of remunerative death to the butchers of the Far East, for their ferocious repressions and rapacious military expeditions. Of course he was denounced in his turn as an enemy of Europe and a traitor to civilization. There were plenty of violent and sincere people, worked upon and excited by the masters of the forges in the liberally bribed Press, who cried out for his arrest. Failing governmental authority, whose weakness they insulted, they declared that they themselves would close the traitor's mouth with their fists. But the tone of wordy warfare had long reached such a high pitch that no importance was attached to the Homeric threats of apaches of the King or the Republic.

Now in these last weeks, which heralded the new season, the barometer showed a change of weather in the air. And that evening of the 18th March, from the moment they arrived at the meeting at which Marc was to speak, his friends felt the approaching storm. Julien Davy and Assia were on the platform with Marc (Annette and Bruno had stayed at home, they did not like these meetings). There was unusual excitement in the hall before the meeting opened. Bitter discussions were going on. Excited or suspicious figures crept

---

## THE COMBAT

---

into the front row, or kept on the outskirts of the meeting, seeming to obey signals of attack or groupings

The arrival of Marc and Julien was greeted with hostile cries, against which the rest of the audience reacted. Their supporters were the more numerous, but they were unorganized. Yet the tumult suddenly ceased, as by the order of the conductor of an orchestra. Assia's sharp eyes saw, and she understood that they were reserving themselves to attack better at the stroke of the baton. She was herself known and marked, she caught passing looks of hate taking her measure, she sustained them boldly, and defied them.

Julien's speech was received with a few insults, quickly repressed, the very coolness of his delivery disarmed them, and his official rank as a great University man and notable savant, commanded respect, moreover, in his case they were only aiming at the pacifist, the "Boche", and that was another story, a dish grown cold! But as soon as Marc stood up the hurricane was let loose. Hisses and hoots, to which were added the opposing yells of his partisans. Marc waited for an interval of silence, but as soon as he opened his mouth the tumult broke out again with redoubled violence. They were clearly determined to prevent him speaking. He shouted. And the shrill notes of his voice broke through the interstices of the din. He was enraged, and losing his self-control in his impatience, he became insulting in his turn. Certain words, harsh and cutting, landed here and there like blows on the faces aimed at. The lashed faces became furious. People stood up shaking their fists. And suddenly there was a rush! Like a ground-swell, rousing the crowd, breaking through counter-rushes, a band sprang to the assault of the platform. They were young gentlemen of *L'Action Française*, or some of Coty's gangs, who had been worked up to a white heat and were cheered on by the brutal threats of paid inciters, who gave their money's worth. From the platform, planted before Marc, whom a little group of friends were trying

to defend, Assia watched them coming, and she could not stop herself from hurling at those below provocative epithets, accentuated by too expressive mimicry pushing out her lips, she made a show, in Russian fashion, of spitting on them

The human wave bounded forward Pushed, carried forward by the ranks pressing behind them, five or six of the most violent leapt on to the platform, and the most agile was a young man of Marc's age, strangely resembling him, thin like him, and with the same refined face of an intellectual, but with eyes starting out of his head, he was mad with hate and fury, as if intoxicated with alcohol He shouted with his stick raised and, rushing on Assia, aimed it full at her face She would have been felled to the ground, if Marc, leaping over the table like a wildcat, had not flown at the assailant's throat The blow was diverted, and only the end of the stick struck her cheek and cut it But the young tiger, carried away by his leap, dragged the other with him, his nails digging into his throat, and rolled off the platform The shock of the fall was terrible for the under man The back of his head had struck the flooring And on the top of him was this madman, crazy in his turn, who would not loosen his deadly claws A mist of blood suffused his eyes, his brain and his spirit bathed in blood He wanted blood His jaws chattered He would have torn the enemy with his teeth And he did not see that the man under him had lost consciousness They had trouble in dragging him from the inert body that he was crushing Only then did he see the livid face that resembled him And he stood still, gaping at it But it was only for an instant The fighting frenzy still raged within him, and the *mêlée* around him was savage With head bent as if to spring again, his pitiless glance followed the broken man who was being carried out, and he thought

" I'd like to kill him a second time ! "

Julien had come down and stood beside him, trying to appease him, and Assia with her cheek bleeding and swollen

He could not hear what they were saying. And suddenly all was dark, the electricity was switched off, the hall became a barking maw of darkness rent by three or four revolver shots. His two arms gripped by two firm hands, Marc blindly let himself be dragged out of the hall, with Assia laughing nervously in his ears. Before he had time to collect himself, he was outside, surrounded by a group of his partisans, and bundled into a taxi, with Julien and Assia.

Then came the nervous reaction, a convulsive shudder shook him. Julien held his hands and spoke to him, he had been painfully shocked by the fit of murderous madness which had come over his young friend, but he tried not to let him feel it, in order to free him from it as soon as possible, he spoke calmly and cordially, making no allusion to the recent scene. But Assia rubbed her bleeding cheek against Marc's pale cheek. When they got home, and were in their room, he shuddered when he saw that blood on his face, and the gleam of triumph in Assia's eyes, she was chattering and excited. Assia was only thinking of the fray, and the danger they had been through together. But he ascribed it to the joy of a victory which she had gained over him. He had been what she wanted, and what he did not want to be. Action had got the better of thought. He had been—he always would be—despite his inner resolves, his sworn vow, his own will, swept away by the flood of violence, and he knew that it might be, at any moment, to-day, to-morrow, that it would be—as it had just been—a frenzy. His hands, his heart and his thoughts were no longer his own, they belonged to savage force, which disposed, and would dispose of them. Prostrate, vanquished, but unable to bear his defeat, he now lay in his bed and Assia clasped him, but lying motionless in her arms, he was like the fallen body of the young enemy he had broken, and he saw once more the livid face with its strange resemblance to his own, and he said to himself

“I have killed myself!”

And once more that night, under Assia's ardent kisses, feverish as she, but with his soul far away, he besought his destiny to save him from *that* which he saw approaching. While Assia, releasing the body, from which the spirit was absent, fell at last into a heavy sleep shaken by sudden starts, Marc, solitary in the narrow bed, in which they touched each other from icy feet to burning thighs, prayed, prayed desperately that in the battles to come it might be his fate to be sacrificed, without sacrificing the life of others, to lessen the sufferings of men, and in defence of the oppressed

## XLVI

This touching prayer, that no ear overheard—he had now the sudden hallucination that it had been recorded. The contract was concluded! His heart sank. But courageously, he accepted it. If he had been given to devotional practices, he would have said “Amen!”

He was too free from superstition, and too eager in his self-criticism, to believe in a Destiny, an unknowable Power, with whom one could hold converse. His intellect disdainfully rejected that illusion. But the human machine does not respond to the lever of reason alone. Marc had long since acquired the habit (and in these last years the habit had developed under trial) of those interior plunges, in which one is alone face to face with the invisible forces which govern life. And life in its turn commands those forces, and dictates the answer it expects from them, and directs them towards the path along which they will eventually drag it. Question and answer come from the same being—he shapes his own destiny. Destiny comes to those who go to meet it. No one saw—except, perhaps, Bruno—the destiny towards which the young somnambulist was journeying. Annette only knew it after the event, then she realized that she had known it before



## THE COMBAT

Over her large eyes, that were like reservoirs, passed many reflections, unperceived by other eyes, which her consciousness refused to report to her

But she was anxious about Marc's state in the days after the disturbance. He was absent-minded, worried and harassed. The tragic hand-to-hand struggle of that evening, from which his adversary had never risen, had not for Marc the judicial consequences which might have been feared, for evidence established the fact that the victim had been the aggressor, and that the fatal lesion was due to the unfortunate accident of a fall. Assia's wounded face bore proof of the brutality of the attack, which excused that of the defence. And the prosecution was abandoned. But Marc did not abandon the case which he brought against himself in his heart. For he alone knew full well the will to murder that had filled that heart. Though he spoke of it to no one, he had inwardly pronounced sentence against himself. He was weary of himself and of all he did. He had lost all taste for work. He took no interest in the furious attacks upon him in the hostile newspapers. Assia herself had to agree with Annette that their boy ought to be taken away from Paris and his surroundings for a few weeks, and that a journey would be the best cure for the cares by which he was besieged.

Circumstances lent themselves to the execution of this plan. Quite a round little sum of money came unexpectedly to Marc for the scenario of a film which he had elaborated. And Assia declared that this money must be spent.

"It is immoral to capitalize money!" said the artful joker. "My principles will not permit it. But they authorize me to eat it up if I—if you—if we have earned it. Eating is good and useful to the community."

"I have not much appetite," said Marc. "But if you have, feast, my girl! Perhaps I shall grow hungry when I see you eating. Choose your menu! It is all the same to me, so long as we eat out of the same plate."

## THE COMBAT

Assia needed no second bidding. She decreed that they would leave Paris for three months. For seven or eight years she had been parched to death between its pavements, she wanted water, water running down from snows and rocks, virgin water, as yet unsoiled by humanity.

"And you want to bring it our fevers and impurities?" said Marc.

"No! I will kneel down before it," said Assia. "I will ask its pardon as I dip my finger in it to make the sign of the cross on my lips and forehead."

She chose the Alps. Hotel life? "No. A little house which we will take for the season, the three of us."

"The three? Ourselves and the child?"

"The child isn't one, he's the halfpenny to the franc. The three are you, me and our Annette."

Marc was grateful that Assia should think of taking his mother. From that moment he made no further objection to the journey. Assia remarked it and told Annette, who needed pressing, that she was indispensable. Marc could not do without her, he was more in love with his mother than with his wife.

"Are you jealous?" said Annette.

"No. Because it's no use kicking against it. You have had the whole of the fine bird! Whatever I may do, I shall never have more than a piece of him."

We will not repeat what Annette answered. To a Gauloise by adoption, and shingled, a Gauloise unshorn! It was Marc who blushed.

They were making their plans together when George came in with Vania. At the first words of the project she cried:

"Take me too! I will be the nurse."

Assia said:

"Why not?"

George to take care of the child. Annette to look after the housekeeping. Assia always managed to combine the

---

## THE COMBAT

---

agreeable and the useful to take two good companions, and free herself from all worry by putting it on them. The refreshing thing about her was that she told them so quite frankly. Marc, abashed, began to apologize.

"Why no, you silly," said Assia. "I am giving them pleasure. George was once an ant. She must have her larva to lick. And as to Mother Annette, she still has milk in her breasts, I am giving her back her leech—you. And even—let's go shares!—me."

George longed to pull the brazen hussy's ears. But at bottom she was delighted. Annette laughed. It was true. She became "grandmamma"—as is the instinct of all healthy women of her age, from whom the blood no longer flows, but who amass it with a flood of love. She would have been willing to suckle a few more children!

Once the decision was made, Marc, who had not cared about it the day before, felt relieved. He caught the common joy, and (his two women had seen well for him) it was a relief to escape for a time from the atmosphere of Paris, saturated with cares. To escape from oneself! He had a right, after such hard work, to play the schoolboy on holiday. To forget everything for three or four months. No danger of not finding on his return all the cares that had been left behind, with not one missing! To play the child. He had had so little time for that in his life of precocious and harassing troubles! Hurry, and make up for lost time!

Jean Casimir, passing through Paris, paid him a visit, the day before they left, and found a happier Marc than he had ever seen. When he heard of the trip, he expressed his approval, which no one had asked for, with a satisfaction which surprised them. Marc and Assia asked the reason for it. He did not explain, but he said

"What a good idea! It's better for you that they should forget you."

---

## THE COMBAT

---

Assia took him aside and questioned him

"What do you know? Was he in any danger?"

"You may well suppose," said Jean Casimir, glaring at her, "that the trade you have put him to is not exactly a peaceful job?"

Assia snapped

"That I have put him to? He does what he must And I do what I must"

"As you please! I do not discuss the order of the factors The result is the same"

Assia forced herself not to continue the passage of arms, as she felt inclined (Good Lord! How this Casimir irritated her!) To find out what he knew, she put on her most engaging smile

"Then, in your opinion, Paris is not very safe for Marc, just now?"

"Not only Paris Look out!"

He had dropped his irony Assia, by reaction, took it up

"They are too contemptible! A fortnight's absence Paris soon forgets"

"The account books don't forget Debit and credit All is written down"

"We will settle up when we get back," said Assia "I have my credit too" And she pointed to her scar

"It is settled," said Jean Casimir "And your credit only held good in Paris But your debts follow you wherever you go You are not well aware of the international partnership of your creditors"

Assia shrugged her shoulders This *poseur* thought he could frighten her! Jean Casimir did not insist Let them fend for themselves! Every man for himself!

### XLVII

How free, light and happy the four of them were as they left

Paris! They felt that they had left behind there all the troubles and shadows of the past. Annette was not the least young hearted. She rejoiced in the restored happiness of her children, and in this holiday that they were allowing themselves together. If she had had any scruple about going with them, she had been unable to conceal her joy that Assia had forced her to accept, she frankly confessed it and her beaming countenance amused Assia. Annette caught her mocking glance.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I am admiring you!"

"It's the same thing."

"You look as if you were beginning life anew."

"I begin anew every morning, with you, the beginners."

"Not only with us."

"What? Not only?"

"You begin again on your own account."

"Upon my word, I'm afraid you are right. Disgraceful, isn't it? At my age!"

"No, indeed! I wish I could feel sure that I would do the same when I reach it. But I don't know that I shall be able to. I envy your eyes. You have the eyes of a newly-made bride."

"Are you mad?" said Annette, ashamed and pleased.

"No, you are."

"You both are," said Marc.

"And I too!" cried George.

They were mad, all four of them. *Beata stultitia*

The four innocents laughed.

Towards morning Annette watched alone, sitting in a corner of the carriage. The others were asleep. She brooded over them. When dawn showed white on the fringe of the high plateau, she thought "Already!" She had wished the night would never end. She held all those she loved under her wings. Beside her, her son, with closed eyes, leant his

face towards the maternal shoulder Annette bent over his young forehead, furrowed by the nails of care, studying the wounded days Many secrets were written there Ah! if she could but have taken his wounds upon herself! She moved her shoulder forward under the sleeper's head, which rested on it Marc's eyes half opened, and the shadow disappeared from his face He smiled as his mother's mouth lightly brushed his eyelids Without moving from the support of her shoulder, he whispered

"Our first night-journey, together "

"There have been others," murmured Annette

"When?"

"Before you were born "

"Where were we going?"

"I was flying to the fields to bring forth my calf "

"Like the cow lo?"

"No, no gadfly was stinging me I had happiness in my womb "

"Those were the good days!" said Marc, with tender irony

"They were not bad for you—you danced "

"I am glad to hear it! And you, what were you doing? Were you singing?"

"You are right! My hymn of Jeanne d'Albret "

"Should we begin over again?"

"What?"

"The Gospel of Mark "

"Without missing a line "

"All the chapters were not good I made you bleed, more than once "

"It was I who made your claws "

"What luck for us, in this hard life, that we should have met each other!"

"Do you call it meeting? Seed of my field!"

"Where does the seed come from?"

---

## THE COMBAT

---

" I don't know I made you mine "

" And if the wind had carried me to another field ? "

" You could never have escaped I would have made you from any seed "

" A little wheat, many tares "

" And poppies and cornflowers Everything is not good to eat But the whole makes my bouquet "

" My more than mother, my friend, there is in both of us—you have given me—folly mingled with reason "

" That is best Could we have lived without it ? The poppy and cornflower lighted us in the sunless years "

" And you are right If I have not gone to the bottom many times, with despair and shame pulling at my feet, it is because I danced in your womb "

" You are dancing still, to the rhythm of the train Let us dance our sorrows, my dear boy, like midges in the sunshine ! "

The first ray touched the hoar-frost on the window-pane

Marc sat up, and his clear eyes gazed at the ray resting on his mother's cheek, and the new day on the plain

" A day of life for the midges ! " he said " Let's dance ! "

### XLVIII

George and Assia spent the days running about the mountains Torn between two passions—love of the child and love of sport—George had ended by leaving the child to Annette, who offered to relieve her of him She felt rather ashamed, but so much the worse ! Her legs and lungs, all her young foal's body cried out for the race, towards the summits and the sun Annette did not complain of the task, at first she had tried to follow them with too eager confidence in her Alpine prowess of yesterday, but her heart took upon itself to remind her that a lifetime had gone by between yesterday and to-day In the middle of a climb she had been

obliged to stop, pierced by an arrow She was choking, but she managed to hide it from the three others

"Go ahead, youngsters! I will follow at my own pace"

She pretended to lag behind picking flowers The laughing climbers went on She was left alone, seated above the valley, drenched with sweat—less from the climb than from the sudden heart attack She recovered her breath, and her hand under her bosom, pressing the artery, felt the enemy in his field She was forced to realize her limitations, illness, the recent attacks of influenza, had reminded her of them, but she had refused to admit them to herself She said

"Well, for a time! I will go easy As soon as I am cured, I will reconquer my frontier of the Rhine!"

She had to confess to-day that she must put back her frontiers How far? And for how long could she hold them?

Campaign in France And at the end, the farewells of Fontainebleau With a smile pinching the corner of her half-open mouth, she grew ironical at her Iliad All said and done, they were all the same! Like that ant on the slope, she had carried her little twig Whither and why? The question was not even asked One has quite enough to think about to bear the burden without stumbling! But the strange thing is that when we are about to be relieved of it, we say to ourselves "So soon over!"

She went down slowly to a turning which hung a hundred yards above the little chalet in the sunlight She sat down on the warm grass with her knees up and her hands clasped round her ankles She listened, against the noisy background of the valley, with its torrent and bells, to the voice of the child, close at hand, his little legs chasing after cheeping chickens And in a moment everything grew confused in her heart Where was she? Was she the grandmother, the mother, or the child? The advantage of having reached the end of the journey is that we can go over it all again, we know it all, and can enjoy it all We cannot do that at the beginning



---

## THE COMBAT

---

She enjoyed the journey so much that she loitered in the middle. She saw herself thirty years ago. The tips of her breasts burnt her. It was her child playing at her feet. She had forgotten the reminder of her age, by pain, a moment ago. Time dragged at the rope in vain. Her natural inclination was towards youth. Her mind was not deceived by it.

"I know, I know. But I shut my eyes. I evade it."

She did not look too closely into what she was dreaming of, with open eyes, amidst the golden hum of bees sucking the gentians and broom.

But another looked, without asking leave. Marc had grown anxious as to what had become of his mother. He turned back, leaving the others to continue their walk. She did not hear him coming. He stopped to look at her. He caught her unawares. She showed him an unexpected Annette—yet a woman whom he recognized, in the halo of memory. His child-eyes had seen her when she was the same age as he was now. It was but the image of an instant: the dreamer, warned by her antennae, turned her head, had a surprise of confused joy, and with one swoop, like a swallow, came back to the to-day. He found Marc's mother again. He sat down beside her, and they talked affectionately. But he did not forget what he had seen in those clear eyes and parted lips, the naive dream, and the desire of renewal. And Annette, confusedly knowing that she had been seen, like a woman bathing in a stream, did not protest, tender and ashamed (the harm was done!), she seemed to excuse herself.

"Horrid boy, don't look any more! You saw me. Pardon!"

They talked of various familiar matters which did not touch the depths of their thoughts. But, as they talked, the relation between them was reversed, unawares. She was younger, and he was older. There was, as it were, an exchange of years between them, which re-established the balance of the

accounts They felt that they had become equals and companions She was not surprised by this fraternity But Marc was silent, and seemed shy, and Annette felt shy too for she knew that he was going to touch upon some secret Hers or his own? A slight inward tremor warned her that it was hers, when her big son, laying his hand on hers, said hesitatingly, then calmly

“Why don’t you marry him, mother?”

She was flabbergasted! She had never expected to hear that secret unveiled What? What secret? It was a secret to herself That such a thought, which she had stifled which she thought dead, should have become visible in her eyes, overwhelmed her She hung her head, crushed She wanted to cover her face with her hands But she could not move Marc, looking at her, saw her confusion He took her tenderly in his arms She nestled in them, hiding her eyes, unable to speak a word, and her silence was an avowal How young she was, and how touching her confusion! Marc said

“Forgive me!”

She replied, without raising her head

“I am ashamed that such things can be read in me! But you are mistaken”

He tried to raise her head with his hands

“Look at me!”

She said “No!”—and plunged back into her hiding-place He smiled, and said, stroking her head

“Don’t be ashamed! What is there to be ashamed of? He loves you You love him And we love him He is worthy of you He is better than we are”

Annette raised her head, and blushing, but with recovered firmness, looked him in the face

“Whom do you mean? You don’t know, my dear boy You can’t know Is it Bruno you mean?”

“And who else?”

"No, you don't know      Even if I were thinking of  
marrying, it would not be Bruno I would marry "

"Don't you love him ? "

"Even if I love him "

"I don't understand "

"Don't understand ! Leave me, at least, that little secret  
corner ! We can't live without shade "

Marc was silent He had understood Annette saw that he  
was going to speak again She put her hand over his mouth

"Be quiet, my boy ! "

He persisted

"Marry the other ! "

"No, I will not "

"Why ? "

"I can't      Let it alone ! It's ridiculous      An old  
woman      "

"You are as young—you are much younger than I am "

"I was      My day is past "

"That's not true      Some hearts are worn out at twenty  
To yours life is always new      You start off again every morn-  
ing "

"Oh, no ! Oh, no !      I don't want to be the Wandering  
Jewess, marching on for all eternity      Enough of trudging !  
Enough of loving ! "

"You don't want us any more ? "

"I want nothing but you      I have only a right to my  
children "

"That's not enough "

"Not enough, my Marc and his Marcassin ! "

"No, for the young go off a-hunting and leave Annette at  
the foot of the hill, as they did to-day "

"Poor Annette ! She can wait      Run along my young-  
sters ! Let each have his turn ! "

"Annette ! " he said, thoughtlessly, and then, in con-  
fusion "Pardon, mother ! "

But she laughed

"But I like it You have become the head of the family "

He hesitated, troubled Then——

"Annette, be it ! I don't think it just that life should stop at the children's threshold When it is still as full of sap as yours, it is a crime to stifle it I feel like a murderer In Nature, when the little ones have learnt to fly, the father and mother go on their own way You are not meant to be chained to another's hearth My hearth is yours But have your own hearth ! And let it be mine ! Let me help you to rebuild your independent life ! "

"I am in no danger of ever lacking independence My dear boy, I need nobody's help to take it I am in much greater need of someone to take it from me "

"I didn't make you say it ! You still love "

"You," said Annette, turning away her head

"Oh, you story-teller ! "

"I am lying ! I ? " said Annette impetuously, squeezing her son's cheeks between her hands

"Why, yes, you love me, that's granted ! Then, why don't you confide everything to me ? "

"What have I to confide to you ? You indiscreet creature, you walk in everywhere, you know everything "

"Well, since I know, confess ! "

"That's already done "

They looked into each other's eyes Marc asked in an undertone

"What holds you back ? Are you afraid of wronging one of the two ? "

Annette silenced him with a gesture

"That's enough, my Marc ! Let's say no more about it ! Perhaps I will speak of it again in a few months I want to think it out alone You trouble me But I like my trouble since it comes from you Thank you for having forced me to see clearly into myself ! "

---

## THE COMBAT

---

They sat close together, in silence, looking down on the valley at their feet Annette said

" My big son ! "

" Do you know," said Marc, " I am holding myself down not to say my little sister ? "

" And so I am," said Annette " We grow smaller as we grow old You are my senior now "

" Lean on me, then ! "

Annette leant upon him They listened to the rumbling of a passing train in the valley below Annette said

" It's fine to have reached the point when we are just brother and sister , and the sister says to the brother ' You are the head It is your turn to guide me ! ' "

Marc had taken her hand And at that moment—the noon Angelus rang out below—they both had a vivid undefined impression that a cycle of their lives was ended It was the deep light of a lovely day But after that came the night For beyond that instant they could see no further into the days that were to come

And that stoppage of the vision fell upon their hearts, like a danger they could not understand But they did not speak of it And they went down again towards the house

### XLIX

The happy days flowed on, days full of confidence and intimacy Mother and son had now opened the doors of silence, the false moral barriers They fraternally exchanged their mutual secrets, which hitherto they had avoided doing And each had the joy of finding in the other his own weaknesses and impulses, the mysterious currents of his life Thus many enigmas of their destiny, which had caused them in isolation trouble and self-reproach, were cleared up or relieved when borne by both together They smiled as they confessed to

each other their imprudences and errors, their taste for the fire, their taste for danger which more than once had made them seek it to their cost and burn themselves at "dangerous" souls. They had to agree that they preferred their burns to the peaceful lukewarmness of so many "worthy people" of their acquaintance. They reproached themselves for their coldness towards these "worthy people." They esteemed them, yes, they esteemed them, those "worthy people"! They were like Roland's mare. She had no faults. But she was dead. There is no hope! The ferment of life, revolt, is lacking in them. That good, exhausted soil now produces nothing. Manure and the ploughshare, "the dangerous soul" and the tillage of revolt, are needed to renew it. The dull field of sterile worthiness must be thoroughly furrowed, and sown with the burning seed that gives life by dying! But one can only do it by being oneself not only the ploughshare, but the seed. To give one's life. To give one's death.

Marc was only too sure that he would give it, it was an unavowed certainty to him, in which desire and fear were mingled (the spirit accepted, but the young flesh shrank back). Annette guessed at these thoughts in her son, but she tried to put them aside, she tried to persuade herself that he would be spared that sacrifice, as she herself had been throughout a life of dangers and struggles. She made the usual mistake of judging the future by the past, she did not see that the era which Marc's life had entered was that of the great upheavals of the earth, on the brink of which her own life had stopped. Is it quite certain that she did not see it? She turned her eyes the other way. Later! Later! There will be time enough to think of it. Do not trouble these happy days! A stream of peace flows through the air.

## L

Annette was walking in the forest half-way up the hillside

The dark trees mingled with the half-bare beeches which were beginning to put forth their Spring plumage. And all together, clinging to the steep sides of the mountain, they looked like an army mounting to the assault. In the distance, from above, came the sound of the woodmen's axes and the crash of falling trees. The pathway wound in a long ring round the mountainside, cut here and there by a young torrent, spanned by a haphazard bridge, with no rail, roughly built and risky, and by a chute—a sudden stony furrow, used for the descent of the rough timber. There was nothing to warn strangers of this but a notice in German, which had been blown down by the wind, and which the carelessness of the country had not troubled to replace, as all the natives knew the danger.

Annette knew it too, from her experience of the mountains. But ahead of her there was a family party who did not know it. The father and mother, seated near the chute, which made a bend just there, were quietly watching their two children and the governess, who were gathering the first violets. The little girl, of eight or nine, venturing to the edge of the chute, risked one leg on the side to reach a clump of primroses. No danger threatened. The chute seemed forsaken. But it was imprudent to walk in it. Annette was about to warn the parents when the little girl lost her footing on the loose ground of the slope, and slid down into the hollow of the chute. The child laughed at the adventure and was in no hurry to climb out. At that very moment, hoarse cries from above gave warning of the descent of a load of timber. Before the child's parents had realized it, Annette, after leaning over the edge, and trying in vain to catch hold of the child's outstretched hand, jumped down and dragged her into the hollow of a promontory formed by the roots of an old pine tree incrusting a rock which hung suspended over the chute. The avalanche of wood and stones rushed past, leaving them untouched. The distracted family had witnessed the scene swift as a flash of lightning, before any of them, frozen with terror, had come to any conscious

decision When the rescuer had hoisted the child, who was beginning to get frightened, on to the bank, she was received with transports The father's emotion was almost hysterical he embraced Annette with tears Annette passing from arms to arms, bewildered by the flow of words and tears that inundated her, felt an irritated amusement at hearing once more the volubility of the Italian language, which she loved

When the first frenzy of feeling had calmed down, and the hugging was over, they introduced themselves The man was very dark, with blue-black, freshly-shaved cheeks, against which Annette's cheeks had been rubbed, a long asymmetrical face, and blazing eyes, he was intelligent, hypernervous, but (as Annette soon perceived) exploited his nerves, like a good actor engrossed in his part, who watches his own acting He proved to be a banker of the Veneto, on holiday with his family at the hotel near the chalet where the Rivières were encamped He had seen them in passing, and his attention, ever on the alert, had recognized Annette from having seen her once in Timon's office, where the rough master had called upon the secretary's memory for precise details of correspondence and business Annette's connection with the *condottiere* had not failed to rouse his curiosity, he had taken pains to inform himself upon that point, and what he heard, good or evil, had interested him in the lady He too was acquainted with the *condottieri*! His roving eyes had quietly taken the measure of the mother, son and daughter-in-law, none of them had seemed uninteresting to him He invited the three of them to supper that night It was difficult to escape, in this place where they were almost the only visitors (the season was only just beginning, and the hotel had only been open a week) The gratitude of the parents needed expression the best course was to yield with a good grace There followed several hours of cordial intercourse, in which the infectious warmth of the Italians conquered even the reserve of Marc and Assia Their affectionate expansion was not feigned, and the confidence displayed



by the banker had nothing to gain from his obscure companions of an evening, it deserved some return from them. They talked quite freely.

Leone Zara was a Dalmatian Jew, of an old family settled in Venice, he managed one of the most important post-War banks. His wife, an American Jewess, also belonged to the financial world. The Bank of the Adige and the Piave had managed, after the march on Rome, to take sides with the government, and was one of its supporters. It devoted a large part of its active funds, and of the deposits of its customers, to works in the interest of Fascism—a party library, and the costly organization for the spread of Italian books abroad. It did more—but Leone Zara modestly only touched the subject very lightly—it liberally subsidized persons whose fidelity to the party was of value (Zara winked slyly) they managed to give all their *people* generously paid jobs. the ticklish susceptibilities of these personages were thus safeguarded. Zara held forth more complacently upon expeditions in Central Asia at once political, commercial and scientific, financed by his bank. A refined and well-informed man, of an ancient, cultured race, with courteous manners (Annette compared him with her Perigord boor), he had a taste for art and intellectual matters. He also had a taste for the psychological collection of human types, and for his private delectation, he had his secret museum of anomalies, abnormal souls, that the troublous times had formed or deformed, supermen or those who are sub-normal. He was proud of his “monsters” to him there was nothing insulting in the word, they were caused by the fiery spurt of nature, often missing her end, or going beyond it, in an attempt to produce a new type—perhaps, the embryo of a species. He did not hide the fact that he had a choice specimen in the very person who held him on a leash—the *Duce*. They held each other mutually. Money, the First. And both had hard heads, one of Rome, the other of Tyre and St. Mark.

He drew a vivid picture of his master. He spoke of him without reserve, with attraction, as a spectator in his box speaks of a stage tyrant. And according to him it was thus that the *Duce* himself fashioned himself as one makes a scenario. He acknowledged it, this *artifex* for whom the world was but a substance to be kneaded! To that degree a *com-mediante* (a *tragediante* for he never laughed!) that everything was theatrical material: nations, the State, public safety. He incorporated everything in his part. He seized upon, he did violence on, the human masses, he entered into them. He remained apart! He was alone, even in conquest. A strong desire, but little love. Little sympathy, little respect for humanity. But rather much more a force of hate, and over all a thorough contempt for all those cringing men who flung themselves under his feet. The word "masses" had actually for him the meaning of a mass of clay for the sculptor's violent fingers. And after all, what counted, what filled his arid, ardent soul, was not men or States, it was his work. That was no small thing! To an *artifex* of his stature, work is much more than the ordinary *ego*, of the dimensions of the average species—more than vanity, more than money, even more than glory. It is the smoking torch of action fighting a dark battle in solitary spaces. Check, victory, what does it matter?—act! To act, to fight, is the only affirmation against nothingness.

Annette followed on the long mobile lips of the banker, grimacing with passionate pleasure (and he, too, was an *artifex*!) the personality he evoked, and she saw one of Shakespeare's adventurers fighting the opaque dream of life, and fashioning destiny, with strokes of his sword, from the thick and bleeding darkness. Zara, who also had his part in the play, said

"So much the worse, so much the better, for those whose fortune (or misfortune) it is to be a piece of that substance which the sculptor crushes between his fingers in modelling his

work ! In this epoch of enormous masses in fusion, pregnant with energies, which impotent democracy allows to wear themselves out and mutually destroy each other, there are only two blast-furnaces which know how to make use of them the *Duce's* Rome, and the U S S R But the latter destroys all the ancient order of things and aspires to found a new order The other adapts the elements of the past, renewing them by changing the form rather than the basis , it has no confidence in progress, it maintains the old armature, faith, the Church, capital, the family and property , inoculating them with the new virus, syndicates, federations of professions, corporations, workers organizations, so as to render them inoffensive ”

Zara naturally found his advantage in the old order, reconsolidated, agglomerated in armed cement, with its old injustices founded on Roman law, its hierarchies, divisions of castes and trades, its classes privileged by birth or adventure, and its plebs—*Populusque*—with their *Imperator*

It was not that he had any illusions as to the dangers of a social construction which depended on the violent genius of one man He knew more than anyone else of this man's moral and physical defects, his weaknesses, illnesses, abrupt and violent oscillations, his disquieting fits of temper and will, that *alca* which shook the ground like the earthquakes which perpetually threaten eternal Rome From day to day the whole edifice, consisting more of Piranesi decoration than foundations, might give way To stake on him, the man, or on the work, was risky But the banker was a gambler, like all those who have to do with fortune To stake on the Prince, or stake against the Prince There was no question of hesitation—for to-day As to to-morrow, one would see !

He had long, quick fingers If the Prince had read Machiavelli, the valet had read him too Besides, he did not attach an excessive importance to fortune , he knew it was fleeting He was as ready to lose as to win, getting warm over the game, but as a game, and keeping his irony cool The *Duce's* terrible

seriousness did not affect him—though he knew how to attune himself to it. He was a Jew of Ecclesiastes, feverish, avid, and detached.

His lucid glance sought Annette's as he spoke. He was too complacent in ascribing his feelings to her. In other days, and at another age, she might, perhaps, have felt some curiosity about the *condottiere*. But she had been made *blase* by age and experience. She had lost interest in the adventure that life was to such as Cortez, Pizarro, the *Duci* and the Timons. She was not impressed, like the ninnies, by these great forces, with their set jaws, whose violent glance falling like the blow of a cudgel, make the masses bend their backs, sweating in their skins with fear and pleasure—the pleasure of being walloped. She knew, as well as Zara, that these great forces have their weaknesses, that these great walls have their fissures, and fall to pieces all of a sudden. With this difference from Zara, that it was, perhaps, because of this pitiful side, which they hid, like a disgrace, that she took some interest in them. These frenzied individuals who braced their muscles to raise themselves above the herd, she watched their convulsive efforts to emerge from it, to dominate it. She knew beforehand that they would be defeated. This one like the rest.

"Black Duce! You will be vanquished. We all are, we all will be, in the end. And it is this denouement foreseen from the beginning of the tragedy which interests us in these conquerors such as Oedipus Rex, Coriolanus and Macbeth! One more! Smoking torch, you will be extinguished. Living dream, bestir yourself, and die!"

Marc felt neither this attraction for the Roman torch, nor this pity (which the torch would have regarded as the most outrageous insult) he would have liked to crush it under his feet. (Hatred is also sometimes a form of attraction—a shield to defend oneself against it.) What Marc saw most clearly in the fresco brushed by the *Fa presto* of the Venetian Ghetto, was not the man with the jaw and the cudgel, but the millions of

backs bent beneath the cudgel, which drew themselves up, in exaltation, after being beaten—the cowardly young men (he knew too many of them, in France and elsewhere) who whined over the weakness of the times, and sigh for a *Duce* or a *Fuhrer*—a foot at their backsides. If they were so fond of strength, let them show their own! To count on that of another, to delegate to him by proxy their own, the strength they wished for, the strength they couldn't show, that they had not got—could anything be more abject? Crouching dogs! Cringing dogs! Let them be whipped! This little male had (who knows?) a feeling of obscure rivalry and revolt against those other big males who reigned over the subject herd. He could never have sacrificed himself for one man. It was not enough! He had taken their measure! And he had an abomination for the "*Qualis artifex*"! He needed a higher object for sacrifice, more than one man—the peoples, the humbled and subjected masses themselves, the whole of mankind. But he could not strike the balance between the two terms—serve men, and act upon them—act through them, act against them, if necessary, in order to act for them! To know how to command and how to obey—the two poles. (It takes the two poles to make the globe.)

Assia, no less hostile than he to the black backs, did not conceal her interest in the Fascist experiment. With her, the violence even of mortal combat did not exclude a substratum of sympathy for a worthy adversary. Her only real aversion was for those who evaded the conflict, those who masked themselves, those who oiled themselves all over to escape, for the viscous, the water-snakes which slip through your hands, for the eunuchs, the impotent and the amorphous. The shrewd Zara perceived this attraction under her animosity. He flashed his lark-catching mirror—that blaze of action overstimulated in the brains of Italians by the black sun, which thousands of aeroplane wings covered and reflected, Balbo's covey of rapacious birds. He pressed the two young people to

## THE COMBAT

come and feel the quickened pulse of that young Italy which foreigners know so little, which Fascism has reared, not for the table, but for the arena, like bulls—Assia easily appreciated that flame of maintained action, even under an aggressive form which grouped them in an army ready to march upon the enemy

“ But, who, if you please, is the enemy ? ”

Her steely eyes were not beguiled by the fool-capturing mirror

“ These marchers-to-the-war, whom are they marching against, and against what ? And for whom, for what, towards what ? Where are you going ? Do you know ? I don't mean you, Monsieur Zara, you probably know, I am not so indiscreet as to inquire, but the others, but your people, your troops, *his* troops—but even himself. He, the man who leads them, he the stage-manager ! Does he even know the end of his play ? What exactly does he want ? What does he believe in ? Has he settled his scenario ? He has altered it ten times, he will alter it ten times more—war, peace, the fist, pacts—if the public has patience to sit out the play. At the present moment, your ideal of Italian Fascism (you disguise it !) does not go beyond an armed nation, barbed and barbed-wired. To your black bands, ready to march, who is not the enemy ? The enemy is everything outside, beyond the enclosure, beyond the Empire. Rome confronting the barbarians.

So then I am the barbarian, we are the enemy ? Cards on the table ! Your combat is not for us. Your combat is against us. And are you quite sure that it is for yourselves ? Has it any aim ? Does it trouble about that ? At its best and highest—as it is tragically understood by the literary cocks who sound the clarion of battle, those who do not fight themselves, but make others fight, the Nietzscheans—your Fascism inspires all peoples with the spirit of battle and of primacy, of eternal imperialism, which, according to your *Duce*, is the very formula of life for ever. It is combat for combat's sake, with-

---

## THE COMBAT

---

out aim, without progress, without hope (' *I need no hope to undertake* ') An old tune '—Well, as for me, I need hope, and I want to know where I am going Where are you going ? "

Zara's long mouth twisted , he laughed

" We go What more can one want ? What men need, at long intervals, is *Animatori*, to wind up the rusty clock of life Don't you think that your France could do with an *Animatore*, like ours, to shake your immovable democracy out of its siesta ? "

" None for me ! " said Assia " I come from other parts I need no ' animator ' I am a Scythian And the fight we are waging in the U S S R is not to carve the statue of a ' *Did you see me ?* ' We fight for all men, for a better future "

" And meanwhile," said Zara, " the present is worse "

" I would not exchange it for any other," said Assia " It is like me when I carried my baby in my womb It bears the future "

" Well, every man to his taste ! " said the banker, with a charming smile " For you, Madame, the fine child—the future !—I am satisfied with the present "

They parted very good friends—since, thank God, any occasion that might force them to be enemies seemed to be excluded The young people seemed inoffensive to Zara (he had never read any of Marc's writings) Mutual courtesy made them pass over differences of opinion as topics of social conversation To Zara, the only serious part of the meeting was the woman's deed of rescue which had snatched his little girl from death Family feeling was the only passion in him that escaped scepticism His lively glance, amused by the discussions of his chance interlocutors, without attaching any importance to them, only rested really on Annette, whom he enveloped with his gratitude , and the young Riviere brood benefited by it He pressed them to visit Italy, and invited them to his house in Rome He placed himself at their service

for any occasion when he might be of use to them. It did not seem that they would ever call upon his kindness. Their plan of travel was limited to Switzerland, and they did not intend to go further than Lugano. Time and the purse were limited.

Time was even more limited than they supposed.

## LI

I think it was on the eve of their departure for Tecino that I saw them. I was sitting in a field above the road that clung to the mountainside. I recognized Marc with his arm through his mother's. I noticed how careful Marc was in helping his companion, who seemed tired, to cross a little stream. The child trotted along gathering flowers, with Assia, who lagged behind, climbing up the banks like a goat. She came close to me, caught sight of a nest of violets above the bench where I was seated, taking no notice of me, she pulled them up, sprinkling me with earth, and jumped down again. Goat-like also were her golden eyes. I looked chiefly at Annette. Her face was bathed in happiness. At one moment when Marc bent down, looking for stones for her to step upon in crossing the stream, I saw how her eyes brooded on her boy's fine head. They disappeared round the bend. I thought I should find them at the hotel in the evening. They were not there. And, next day, when I inquired for their address, I heard that they had left by the first train.

## LII

The sun had fled to the other side of the St. Gotthard. They followed it to Lugano. Under a trellised arch over a hollow road, they came upon George, laughing, with her arms



raised to the inaccessible bunches of grapes, her mouth open as if to drink them. She threw herself into their arms.

She had gone to join her father who had been cited as witness in a lawsuit. It was the case of that Italian aviator, a *fuoruscito*, who had scattered sacks of antifascist pamphlets over Milan, and on his way back had broken his wings against the St Gotthard. Wounded, cared for, but arrested by the Federal Government, he appeared before the court of Bellinzona, for infraction of the neutrality of Swiss territory. Witnesses in his favour were not lacking, they came from the principal emigration groups in which he was known and appreciated. And Julien had been appealed to. However overburdened with work he might be, and bewailing in his heart every hour of his time stolen from science, Julien never hesitated, when necessary, to do his duty as a citizen of the world, and to put the weight of his authority in the scale in which the oppressed, the rebels against tyrants, were being weighed. "*In tyrannos!*", the words of Schiller, which this old liberal bore graven in his heart! His evidence had made a sensation at the trial, in which the accused in the end became the accuser. The great proscribed, come from London and Paris, had seized the opportunity of publicly slapping the proscribers in the face. And the democratic magistrates of the Swiss canton, who could not conceal their sympathy with the champions of liberty, had decided on an acquittal. But the Federal Council at Berne, uneasy at the stir caused by this decision and anxious to soothe the outraged pride of their dangerous neighbour, gilded the pill by condemning the acquitted to a mild imprisonment.

All this news overheated public opinion, and the noisy nonchalance of Lugano was stirred up by it. Under the arcades and in the cafés, there was a buzzing of angry wasps. Two-legged flies were not lacking. They came and went from shore to shore. In those happy days, the walls of Lugano were hung, as on the feast of Corpus Christi, with listening

black ears There were some of all kinds, for natives and foreigners Neither Annette, George, nor Marc took any notice of them But Assia's experience made her sniff the air at once The moment she entered any assembly she smelt out the pike Her ever-roving glance scanned every face and infallibly lit upon the fish, and with a quick movement drove in the hook The other felt the prick, fidgeted on his chair, with a scratched throat, tried to get away from the line by turning his attention elsewhere, and finally took himself off More than one of these silent duels of glances were fought round her three companions, seated at a table in a *confetteria*, without their suspecting it Marc, who for the pleasure of rousing George's jolly, hearty, childish laugh, was amusing himself boyishly by wielding his Harlequin wand on the backs of the "negroids", as he called the black shirts, opened his eyes in amazement when Assia, laying her hand on his, whispered

"Not so loud!"

He asked

"Why?"

And Assia, upon reflection, said to herself

"After all, why not? So much the worse and so much the better for the fish on the watch! I see them turning green in their broth A pinch of salt, and we'll settle their hash!"

Spies on their rounds abroad are used to insults, they would not have taken much notice of the insolence of a few passing tourists But Marc was soon under observation when they saw his intimacy with Julien, whose part in the trial had attracted attention Julien was at the head of the black list, as Honorary President of the Antifascist League, he was under special surveillance, which he did not avoid, he scorned it His young companion at Lugano got the benefit of it

Among those eager to share in their conversation was a young Italian whom Marc had met before in antifascist circles in Paris He had a handsome, intelligent face, marred

by a "wine-stain" on his cheek and a certain tic, the nervous opening and shutting of one eyelid. His name was Buonamico, and he made a display of hysterical excitement against the Government. He came and went from Paris to London and Brussels, through the different colonies of *émigrés*, burning with holy agitation, warming up discouraged loyalties, submitting in ambiguous words, vague and violent projects, bombs and plots, reminiscent of the *carbonari* conspirators. The old politicians among the *émigrés* looked upon him as a romantic, and distrusted him. The young, more inclined to action, lent a ready ear, but taught by experience, received his suggestions with reserve. He was tenacious and patient. And he spoke, with tears and suppressed rage, of his old mother and young brother, who were detained at Faenza as hostages, and whose lives were threatened. His emotion was shared by the exiles, many of whom endured the same sorrows. He had access everywhere, was serviceable, active, and not a cadger, his only mania was that he was always wanting to deposit some valise or papers with one person or another, which seemed justifiable, as he was constantly on the move, but no one felt greatly flattered at being chosen as the depositary, for recent unpleasantness with the Paris police had taught them that it was not always good for an exile that his right hand should not know what his left hand has received. People generally arranged to pass on the deposit to someone else. In the end, Marc had received and kept it on various occasions—though with no pleasure—for he thought it disobliging to evade the request, and he pitied Buonamico for these affronts. But no doubt he was more thin-skinned than Buonamico, who showed no resentment, nor even the faintest recollection of them, for he indefatigably renewed his attempt with those who had dodged them two or three times. If there was any shame in it, it should rather have lain with the refusers, for nothing had occurred to justify their distrust.

If Buonamico was without rancour, he was not lacking in

gratitude, and he favoured Marc with special attentions. Two years before, when plans were on foot for the escape of the prisoners on the Lipari Islands, many people, men and women in the liberal circles of France, England and Belgium, were actively engaged in this work, and Marc, who was full of zeal for these attempts, had imprudently hinted that he knew more about them than he said. Buonamico did not press him to tell, he spontaneously confided to him, under the seal of secrecy, another plan of escape, in which he was collaborating, for in the fever of the enterprise several parallel plans were being pursued. In exchange, Marc told him what he knew of his own plan. He had not boasted of this to Assia, who at the first glance had passed an unfavourable judgment on Buonamico. He had an unpleasant impression when he heard, a few weeks later, that the Lipari Authorities had been warned, and had defeated his plan. Trying to overcome these misgivings, which he did not care to explain to himself, he hazarded, without mentioning any name, a few words about Buonamico's plan to certain well-informed people, who shook their heads categorically, as they declared

"Nothing serious in that!"

He asked himself whether he had not supplied the thief with good money for false coin. But there was so much mutual disparagement between antifascists, equally sincere, that Marc found no sufficient reasons to subscribe to their judgments one against another, and nothing authorized him to establish a connection between the chance failure of a plan and indiscretion on the part of Buonamico. He merely avoided meeting him from that time onwards.

Since then more than a year had elapsed when Buonamico met him at Lugano. He displayed a too lively joy. Marc responded badly. Buonamico was unmoved by this. He praised the temerity of the aviator of the broken wings, but he loudly declared that it was a childish deed to risk one's life for the sake of scattering a little paper, and that at that rate

it would cost no more to go and drop a basketful of explosives on the Palazzo Venezia. Marc made no answer. Juhen, whom Buonamico sounded, needed no effort to keep silent, he kept his thoughts to himself. Assia took the flowers Buonamico offered her, she looked him straight in the face with no sweetness in her smile, smelled the bouquet, turned her back on him, and left the flowers lying on a bench. The only one of the group who responded to his advances was kind Annette, who was touched by Buonamico's accounts of his poor mother, they were often seen together, Annette listened patiently, and consoled the sorrowing son, who sometimes wiped away a tear and, grateful for her sympathy, respectfully kissed her hand with "*tante grazie*." But Annette had no secrets to divulge. And Buonamico was discreet and did not abuse the kindness of the consoler, he kept himself at a distance from the little company.

Nevertheless, he was immediately aware of their plans for a trip to Italy. Marc and Assia had discussed it for the first time the previous evening, in the almost deserted hall of their hotel. There was no one present but Juhen and Annette, and a little way off, a very correct old gentleman reading *The Times*, with a cup of coffee before him.

Since he had got beyond the wall of mountains that cast a shadow on the unfavoured Northern land, Marc had been drunk with sunshine. His eyes rested longingly on the beautiful shores of Italy, blooming there, close at hand like a flower, and, in the sky above the capricious hills, on the warm mirage of Lake Como. Annette and Assia knew the enchanted land Annette because she had stayed there in her youth, during her father's lifetime, and since the War she had passed through it several times on her travels. Assia had also visited it twice during her fortunate childhood and in the days of the dark exodus. The two women had seen its double face—the *palazzi* crowned with roses, and the fever, hunger, and filth. But around both faces lay the magic circle of Circe, the serene,

voluptuous, the light which bathes riches and poverty They talked about it to each other, with a smile of understanding, as of a secret pleasure only evoked between initiates Marc was the only one who did not know the savour of the fruit, and he longed to get his teeth into it, he had only to stretch out his arm to gather it

“ Why shouldn't we go to Italy ! ”

The two women caught the ball on the rebound To share a pleasure he does not know with one we love is like eating fruit with his mouth Julien made certain objections, he did not think the trip advisable, secretly he saw the danger of it But he knew that his prudence was generally exaggerated, why spoil the pleasure of his friends by telling them his fears for which there was really no serious foundation? Besides, Julien was not very much “ in the know ” Like most intellectuals, even of the extreme Left, he gave too much importance to ideas in the social conflict, and was insufficiently informed upon the economic situation At that moment, his solicitude for Marc did not see any risks for the young polemist, but those of antifascism He did not take into account the International of interests, the feudalists of industrial Imperialism, to whom Marc's campaigns were a source of anxiety So he contented himself with advising Marc to watch his words once he was past the frontier Marc and Assia took it laughingly they had nothing to watch, their one idea was to have a good time for a fortnight No politics A holiday from all serious business! They would let Julien and George take the child back to Paris Annette discreetly offered to go home too But Assia said

“ What a sell for you if we took you at your word ! ”

Annette said

“ That's true Don't let me be sold ! ”

However, nothing had been decided, and they were surprised next day when Buonamico accosted them with a smile saying

“ When do you start ? ”

Marc, pretending not to understand, evaded the question. Assia frowningly blamed Annette's chatter. But Annette swore that she had not mentioned it. In the afternoon Assia, walking in the exotic shade of the beautiful garden by the water side, perceived round the bend of a path the old gentleman who had been reading *The Times* sitting talking to Buonamico—Annette felt uncomfortable that evening, in the hall of the hotel, when Assia, seeing the noble old man installing himself at a table near theirs, broke off in the middle of the conversation and got up, saying in a clear voice

“ Let's go and talk somewhere else ! ”

The explanation she gave them in the opposite corner of the hall did not satisfy Marc. Not that he was not struck by it, but he showed his impatience at Assia's perpetual suspicions, he pretended to make light of them as the disposition of an uneasy and troubled feminine mind. He taxed her with pusillanimity. Nothing could be more mortifying to Assia.

That was why, out of bravado, he did not avoid Buonamico, though he took no pleasure in seeing him, he even told him their plans for the journey. Buonamico warmly encouraged Marc. He planned the itinerary for him, and furnished him with the addresses of hotels that he recommended. And he regretted that he could not accompany them. He bewailed the fact that he was forbidden entrance to his native land.

The attraction of that land drew him to join Marc and Assia in walks to the frontier. Once beyond Gandria, he crossed it, pressing his companions to do likewise. They had not got their passport visas, but Buonamico boasted that he knew paths where they would meet no one. Assia refused to play this schoolboy game, which, in the company of a *fuoruscito* (of what colour ?) was not worth the risks. Marc persisted in defiance, what had he to fear ? Buonamico's risk was much greater, at least, so he said, but he undertook to lead Marc to a little creek, sheltered by rocks, where they would find a

boat which would take them back to Gandria, unseen, along the overhanging coast. He said he would show Marc that the Italian *émigrés* had secret ways for the coming and going of their propaganda. And everything fell out just as he said. Marc and Assia (for the latter, whom Marc scornfully advised not to go with him, had, of course, followed him) found the boat at the place indicated, hidden under the heavy foliage of overhanging trees, and they got back to Lugano without mishap. But Assia's confidence in Buonamico was not increased, for she thought that in risking this pawn on the chessboard he must have been very sure of winning. She kept these reflections to herself, and those of the morrow likewise when she managed to worm out of Annette that in her absence Buonamico, greatly moved, had confidentially entrusted to them a letter for his poor mother, and as the latter's house was watched he had taken the precaution, in order to avoid any risk to the bearers, of enclosing the letter in another envelope addressed to a friend in Milan, who would undertake to pass it on.

Assia said nothing. Discussion was useless, the two simpletons had pledged themselves. To Annette it was an affair of the heart, to Marc an affair of honour. Honour and heart did not trouble Assia much, when those she loved were at stake. She did not hamper herself with useless scruples. The night before they left Lugano, while Marc was asleep, she got out of bed, went through his pockets, found the pocket-book in which he had put the letter in the side pocket of his coat, removed it and with a clear conscience slid the booty under her pillow, and her cat-like body between the sheets, and to complete the joke began to tickle Marc, who awoke, protesting, unable to make out why the madcap laughed and laughed.

Next day she took her time to examine the stolen envelope, she unsealed it carefully, read and re-read, with puckered brow, a wicked look in her eyes, and breathing through her nose



she sat studying the letter, recited it to herself from the first word to the last, then she tore it into little bits, spat on it, as she might have spat in the writer's dirty face, and burned the pieces. Justice done, but not satiated, she licked her lips, and after meditation, wrote another letter which she put into the intact envelope which she gummed down again. The whole found its way back to Marc's pocket, where she succeeded in depositing the *billet-doux* before their departure.

## LIII

The first days of idling on the happy shores of the opal lake where the Borromeans bloom, were like them, fairy islands. The cooing of the doves arose under the warm shade of the gardens, with the breath of the orange trees and the chromatics of their lazy oars kept tune with the laughter of the three schoolchildren on holiday. All three were free of care, unburdened, happy in body and light of heart, like the dandelion down that floats upon the fields. Annette was not the least youthful of the three. She climbed gaily, in spite of her heart. And she came down on foot from the Mottarone Baveno by slippery slopes and hard rocky paths, her feet were sore that evening, and her ankles swollen next day. She took care not to mention it. But on arriving at Milan she was forced to give in. When she tried to get up she cried out, her loins were aching, she had to surrender for twenty-four hours, and spend the day in bed.

The other two birds did not lose a beakful. she drove them out of the room herself. "Go and peck at the streets and museums!" They had only a fortnight for the Italian tour. It would not do to waste a single day. And so much the worse for crocks! Annette laughed, putting a good face on ill luck. And dozing between her sheets, avoiding any movement for fear of rousing the pain, with the window open,

ears full of the gay noise, she let her eyes wander over the white balusters, astragals, and slender spires of the marble forest of the *Duomo*, rising above the roofs in the light sunlit mist, aureoled by the flight of white pigeons. The hours sped by uncounted, and she did not feel forsaken. The others did not come back to lunch. She approved of their selfishness, and read Baedeker on Milan as an *ersatz* instead of the *giro* she would have taken with them. She fell asleep as she read.

A noise of steps in the passage, imperious knocks at the door. She started. It must be between four and five in the afternoon. She said

"Come in!"

There entered one, two, three individuals with heavy cheeks and shaven jaws, rolling terrible and foolish eyes. By their comic-opera Iago appearance, Annette recognized them as police officers—surrounding Marc and Assia. And outside the closed door the military footsteps of a fourth watchdog could be heard in the passage. Marc was pale and restrained, he protested in a choked voice which he exerted himself to keep from rising into a shout. Assia, very much at her ease, exchanged a sly wink with Annette over the shoulders of their guardians. With no further explanation two of the three men set about searching their trunks and clothing. The other, coolly seated at Annette's bureau, was writing the report. In an instant the room, and that of the young couple adjoining, were littered with clothing. The great paws foraged among Assia's chemises. Marc stamped his feet, swallowing his rage. Assia, seated with her legs crossed, had lit a cigarette, and mocked the hunters with her eyes, she advised the officer to make a note of the trademark on her knickers. The coolness of Annette as she looked them up and down, and the jeers of the impudent cigarette-smoker, stung them to the quick. They insisted on searching the invalid's bed as well. Marc planted himself before it, vowing he would not allow it. Annette pushed him aside with her hand.

"Come, sirs, make my bed!"

And leaning on her daughter-in-law, she walked calmly, with stiff legs, to the table at which the superintendent was seated, and made a movement to take up the telephone. He opposed it.

"Very well," she said, as if she were addressing the hotel porter, "then telephone to the bank of the Adige and Piave that Mme Rivière wishes to speak to the director Leone Zara!"

The other asked in surprise

"The *Signore Commendatore*? What for?"

"I should like him to be present at this search," she said

"Do you know him?"

"Ask him!"

The police officers, taken aback, looked at each other, the two who had already seized the mattress stopped short, and looked questioningly at their chief. The superintendent made up his mind and telephoned. The honeyed looks he displayed when he heard the golden voice (the epithet is appropriate) of the *Commendatore* in person, attested the importance he attached to that gentleman. Everyone knew that he was one of the pillars of the *regime*, if genius or fist makes the "*Duci*", it is Money that maintains them, without that support, flop! But the smile of obsequious devotion which cleft his face froze to an expression of consternation when the message being delivered, the voice, repeating the name of Mme Rivière, exclaimed, then waxed indignant. There was a vehement colloquy in which the superintendent in confusion explained what had occurred, the other invisible one fulminated, the superintendent protested, excused himself, and beat a retreat. The two women and Marc were silent, trying to follow and taking in the outbursts eructated by the machine and the clumsy admissions of the agent, which made it clear that the police had fallen into the snare they had set themselves, and trying to revenge themselves for their

---

## THE COMBAT

---

first blunder had stumbled into a second trap, for they had failed to find anything to justify the arrest. The reprimand continued, unappeased. The superintendent, flattened out, now replied only with protestations of devotion. Annette took the telephone out of his hand (he hastened to hand it over to her), and she apologized to the banker for disturbing him with this ridiculous incident. She thanked him and accepted his invitation to go and see him in a few days, when passing through Rome, and very haughtily deigned to cover the blunder of the anxiously-listening police officers by declaring that everything was now settled. The superintendent eagerly agreed, and when the telephone was hung up again, he burst into verbose apologies, he offered, with the help of his men, to repack the trunks they had turned out, but Assia considered that once was enough to have them wiping their hands on her underclothing, and dispensed them from the task. The alarm over, and reassured as to the consequences of his *faux pas*, the superintendent recovered his assurance as a *galantuomo*, and paid the young woman a heavy compliment, congratulating himself that the misunderstanding had procured him the privilege of spending an afternoon in such charming company.

"I congratulate myself too, Signor Cavaliere," she replied, "for you have supplied me with a priceless piece of copy for my paper."

She had waited to the last moment to inform him that she was correspondent to an American newspaper. He nearly choked with dismay. Annette calmed him with a gesture, saying that the incident was closed. Marc put an end to the protestations of devotion, which were beginning again, by showing the invaders the door, with a stern gesture, without saying a word, he slammed it behind them, while Assia forced a shrill laugh.

Annette, silencing her, reproached them for their lack of prudence, and asked to be enlightened, at last, as to what had

## THE COMBAT

happened Marc related Assia maliciously let him go on, watching his face and listening to his furious and confused account, and she was bursting with laughter, for he could not understand what had occurred, he did not know the answer to the riddle. She revealed it in the end, he had taken Buonamico's letter to the address, as Assia had expected, the bearers had been caught in the trap by the police posted at the door. But when the letter was opened in their presence the round-eyed superintendent read as follows

*"If you want to catch the fish, change the fly! The Buonamico is found out"*

Marc looked foolish and bewildered

"What? What?" he said "And he gave me the letter himself!"

Annette had understood

"Brigand!" she said to Assia "And what was in the real letter?"

Assia recited it by heart. The letter revealed, as to an accomplice, a fantastic plan of conspiracy against the government. The pseudo-conspirator was requested to send his comrades (here followed the names of the most prominent antifascist *emigres*) precise and varied information as to air-defence, aerodromes, guards, militia barracks, etc. Buonamico had not signed the letter.

Marc was silent, stupefied. Assia triumphed without shame.

"Who was right? You little idiot! Are you convinced now about your good friend?"

Marc shrugged his shoulders

"I have been that long since! I suspected it"

"Papal mule! Did you do it on purpose?"

"I had doubts but no proof. And I thought he might be a traitor and yet have a mother to whom he was still a guileless, pitiable son. I despised him and pitied him. But I don't understand"

“What more is there to understand?”

“Just why he should pitch upon *me* as the one to betray, I who defended him against others (and he knows it!), I but for whom he would have been executed in Paris?”

“He was furious at his failures. He had to bring off an exploit at any price. And you, did you hide your suspicions from him?”

“No,” said Marc. “I scorned to.”

“Yes, you didn’t even do him the honour to be afraid of him. And you are surprised that he revenged himself?”

“My child,” said Annette, “you are very quick at seeing the mistakes of others. Why then do you make so many yourself? Would it not have been wiser to save us from the trap than to make the trappers fall into it and then make fun of them?”

“I have sinned,” said Assia. “I sin and I shall sin. I never could resist sin. *Et ne nos inducas!* Revenge is so sweet!”

“He has revenged himself. You have revenged yourself. And whose turn is it now?”

## LIV

She did not say that, when she had spoken to the banker over the telephone of her intention of coming to thank him in Rome, Zara’s voice had sounded a little embarrassed and he had not welcomed the proposal. In the evening he had even telephoned again to Annette’s hotel. But she had gone out with her children, and when she returned the porter forgot to tell her, he only remembered next morning, just as the three travellers were about to catch the train for Bologna. There was no time to communicate with Rome. Annette never knew what Zara meant to tell her. And Zara, who had informed himself since their meeting in Switzerland, after

---

## THE COMBAT

---

hesitating between two courses, one of friendship, the other of prudence, had finally chosen the latter, and kept silence. He was a fatalist, inasmuch as fatalism was in favour of his tranquillity, since luck would have it that he had not been able to get Annette on the telephone the night before, leave it at that ! He had done his duty.

Annette would have thought it prudent to go back. This beginning to their trip made her uneasy. But it delighted Assia, she was enchanted that she had broken the spider's web woven across the doorway. It suited her adventurous temperament. She was more interested in the Italy of the present day than in the museums.

Marc had hastened to brush aside the cloud from his Italian sky, but the incident had repercussions within him, which it was not in his power to arrest. This brief personal contact with the police machinery of defence and provocation which protects the flanks of tyranny, had made the latter more intolerably real to him than accounts read in the newspapers. He had not now the same joy in the air, the sun, the beautiful faces, the golden hands, the healthy and proud *giovinazza*, the flowers, fruit, and gaudily painted churches. He perceived a sickly odour of lagoons in the cloying glances of the holy *gitons* and semi-virgins of Gaudenzio and Luini, and the inveigling smiles of Vinci's androgynes. He did not perceive the serene bitterness of the humiliated spirit which, in the days of the Moor, as in those of the *Duce*, revenges itself against the tyrant by irony and dreams. He would have thought them the ruses of prostituted slaves. He saw the interposing shadow of the wings of the bird of prey darkening the sun.

They covered the plains of Lombardy. The timid souls hid themselves, with heads under their wings, or cackled, feigning to forget their servitude and the suspended menace. The few friends of Annette and Count Chiarenza, whom they visited in Milan, appeared painfully embarrassed at receiving them, they seemed to fear the words which might fall from

---

## THE COMBAT

---

their visitors' lips, and hastened to talk very loud, with excessive animation upon trivial matters. Some, rather braver, were bold enough to admit their guests to the farthest room in their apartments, after passing through two or three others, and there, behind closed doors, after making sure once more that no one was listening in the next room, they showed a troubled countenance. They seemed to be asking pardon. They murmured "One can't talk." They were visibly overwhelmed with shame. They could no longer be sure even of their own children, enrolled from the age of ten, and trained to smell out, and denounce the quarry. Worst of all (they admitted it) was the abject fear that weighed upon a part of Italy, and the constraint of not saying what one thought, the daily lie of words, gestures, and looks, insinuated itself into the soul, like a degrading habit, the purest felt the taint with sorrow, and in moments of intimacy were obviously quivering and tormented. An unappeasable fury lay beneath, but its limbs were broken. In charity, they filled its mouth with earth.

"Choke and die!"

There were plenty of other Italians who cheerfully adapted themselves to the new order, bought at the price of liberty. There are two different temperaments. Even among the individualist peoples of the South, two irreducible kinds of individualism are in perpetual opposition: that of liberty at any price, and that of the Cæsarean order, provided that individual pride can profit by it. These are the majority having no sufficient reason to be proud of themselves alone, stark naked, destitute of any mind of their own, or means of action, they are relieved that a master or a State should think for them, and act through them, and are cheered to be associated with that power, and its promises of glory. Every particle swells and becomes a mass, or so deludes itself, like the frog in the likeness of the bull, when the bull bellows, the bellows swell the *brékkékeké* with pride. What they are not,



---

## THE COMBAT

---

what they cannot be, what they dream of being, they flatter themselves that they have become by a blank power of attorney handed over to the dictator, or the State. And they kiss Cæsar's boots, whether real or made of cardboard, which keeps up the fiction of the bundle in which each of the separate weaknesses bound together believes that it represents the strength of the whole. *L'Etat c'est moi* "Poor things! And yet the *corporative* State was swallowing the corporations, associations, and the citizens in gross and in detail. The bundle belonged to the fist. *Suum cuique* For some, to have. For the others, let them be had! They have been had! "

They were proud of it. Proud of that fist. And, in spite of all, everywhere, hope (no matter which! to build or to destroy) burst forth from that beautiful fertile race, whose inexhaustible vitality lifts it above thoughts of despair, and its fields of fever and nothingness. Those young men, with bodies castrated of the free soul, seemed all the healthier for it, they overflowed with animal joy, and their overheated pride blazed up. The wind of the *Duce* blew the flames and smoke like a sirocco. Under the plume of the volcano, the *giovinetza* gather in the grapes! But perhaps it will be the vintage. Who will drink it?

Marc's joy was spoiled. He could not bear the sight of this stage-managed scene of a young Empire, the conscripted gaiety of that youth, which no longer felt the value of liberty, that façade of constructions with no main building behind it, that show of works exhibited to foreigners. He suspected the emptiness of soul that lay beneath it. He felt that the fevers and miseries of that world were his own. That dear Italy, he clasped her with the ardour of a young lover, it pained him to see her subjected and humiliated—and if she had fallen so low as not to feel her humiliation, that was worse still!

Assia said, as she lovingly caressed his forehead, eyes, and mouth, in bed

---

## THE COMBAT

---

"It's not your fault, my darling! Don't fret yourself over it! You seem to be as angry with her as you were with me"

She thought "When I was false to you" She did not say it But Marc's start showed that he had understood She entwined herself

"Pardon," she whispered, "pardon for her and for me!"

Marc clasped her

"I love you better than before But I am sad for her, for you, for myself, and for all that has been"

"I'm not," said Assia "If you love me better (and I love you better) than before, I rejoice for what has been"

"Do you really dare?" said Marc

"I dare And you dare too!" said Assia, biting his neck "We are not white geese bewailing themselves because they have soiled the tip of their wings We are wild ducks who will only fly the higher for having plunged in the river Love your duck! And love that other (I allow you), this Italy who, with her long swan's neck buried in the mud, shows the heavens her black rump, like a triumphal tiara When it has eaten enough mud, the long neck will emerge from the bottom and the great bird will be right side up again, then it will only float all the better on its sea—'*mare nostro*' There is time for everything for the mud bath and the wind bath Italy will do as I have done I am washed clean of mud I have had my bath And I clasp you Say that I smell of good sea air"

"You are the entwining siren," said Marc, enlaced and enlacing her, "even your mouth smells of seaweed"

By her assurance she restored his joy and confidence in life No, it was not possible that this Italy, this land of gods and heroes, could be as she was represented by the Press, at the orders of the *condottieri*, and by this stage-setting, painted for the *Duce's* scenario Beneath the silence of gagged mouths, we know well that there are some of the freest souls, like our

Count Chiarenza We know of some among the living, whom we will not name, mentioning only the sacrificed immortals, Anendolas, Matteottis, and Lauros, brothers of Icarus<sup>1</sup> The black tyrants and the simoniacal priests, whom Dante, as fierce as they, but in hate as in love breathing forth his diamond genius, has tortured in his hell, were born of the same earth on which were scattered the roses of Assisi and the blood of St Francis The abject plebians who tore the noble victims of the Bourbons to pieces as in the circus games, were brothers to the martyrs of the *Risorgimento* and to the most humane people in the world That holy land is ever, to our love, the land of the apostle of the rights of the people Mazzini Our Mazzini still lives in the hearts of those men among the oppressed whom the oppressor will never bend It was enough for Marc to meet even one, a young friend of Count Bruno's, his *alter ego* in the crippled work of the *Mezzogiorno*, who reminded him, with a sad, proud smile, of the heroic word of Euphorion

*"An impregnable fortress is man's breast of tempered steel"*<sup>2</sup>

Marc acquired an inward conviction that all the assaults of tyranny would shatter themselves against it "*Credo*"  
 I believe ! I believe that Italy will rise again I believe  
 in truth and in life "

Assia said

"We are whole The world is whole The unwholesome dies The whole live, the whole will conquer And we will help them, my friend ! We are both enrolled in the great army of sweepers To-morrow clear for action ! Every man will sweep before his own door And if there is a stench before their doors, if these *lazzaroni* are too slow in setting about it, we will sweep before their door ! If they do not

<sup>1</sup> Lauro de Bosis

<sup>2</sup> Goethe *Second Faust*

---

## THE COMBAT

---

deliver themselves, we will make them free      And meanwhile, great lazybones, stir your stumps! And with all our might (joy is might) let us take joy!"

"I take *my* joy," said Marc, taking her

### LV

Joy returned      And for all the rest of the journey it dwelt within him      Between the two enchantresses, Assia the cat and the Italian *Primavera*, no room was left for care      And why burden oneself with care, since one knows what one will do—it is decided—and that we will act to-morrow? There is nothing to do but to await the morrow      The morrow will come      And light of heart, with conscience at rest, let our beaks peck at and enjoy the last hours of to-day

The three beaks enjoyed them      Never did starlings in a vineyard show a better appetite      They had been so long deprived of the golden fruit! Marc had never known it      This was the first time he had ever been out of northern France      He said, with tears in his eyes

"So it was true? Beauty really does exist on earth!"

Assia laughed

"Flattering for us!"

Marc, abashed, excused himself

"No, I did not mean that      you, I did not mean you      you two      You, you are myself, I cannot see you now      I mean all this, all this around us      " (He pointed to earth and sky)

"All right, my love, don't apologize!" said Assia      "I know very well that even if I were ten times as ugly as I am, you would love me better than the loveliest      You can't help it! For you hold me and I hold you      So feast your eyes to the full! Your Assia is not jealous      And, if you feel like it, you may even kiss the lips of one of these girls with blazing

---

## THE COMBAT

---

eyes who carry baskets on their heads, and walk the road like Victories, whose ship bears on the prow the buckler of their firm breasts ! You will bring the taste of orange back to me "

She added

" Or of onion                      It doesn't matter ! I am not jealous of a fruit   Your mouth is mine ! Gladden your mouth ! Everything is mine ! "

Their joy increased as they advanced into Italy   It had its full moon after they had crossed the Appenines   The two women anticipated Marc's emotion when he first set foot in Florence   It surpassed their expectation   Marc lost his breath when he found himself shut in by the narrow streets with their large flagstones, between the implacable walls of the high palaces, and saw rising upwards, piercing the sky, the bare sword of the tower of the Signoria   First fear   He did not speak it   The blow of the dagger   His legs gave, he leaned against the wall   Then, like the spurt of blood from the wound, admiration burst forth in cries   His companions were laughing, they saw nothing but beauty   Of the *Quattro cento* of massacres, of death ambushed at every corner, their eyes saw nothing but the robe of art, and the fine proud coat of arms, the *Armeria*, from which the centuries, those guardians of museums, had rubbed the stains of blood   But Marc, good dog, smelt its rust at once   Blood is blood   It is ageless   Was it that of *Matteotti* ?   At the corner of the square, Annette showed him the spot where God's scapegoat, Savonarola, was burned   And there, on the hooks, like those of a butcher's stall, in the façade of the black palace, were hung the heads and quarters of conspirators   And on the walls and in the churches, those *Duci*, the *condottieri*, the great butchers   And these women laughed, as laugh the fair girls with long feet, swaying like reeds, with heads too heavy for their bodies, in' the frescoes and paintings in the museums   And Marc laughed   He laughed too   Life

is beautiful One forgives it for being cruel when heaven places on its brow, as on the tops of the stern palaces, its crown of violets And when beneath that brow bloom those eyes, ardent as mouths And in those mouths the melodious Tuscan speech And to complete the intoxication of the sky, art, and beautiful bodies, a good meal washed down by a cool and heady *fiascho* of Chianti Marc was not an abstainer Neither were his companions, daughters of Noah They gave thanks to all that is good

But if, when they returned at night, their heads were dancing, it was because their eyes had drunk much more than their throats, the shining of the day And in their communicating rooms they left the door open and continued chattering from one bed to the other, the mother hen and her ducks, until sleep overcame them But sometimes in the middle of the night, Annete would get up (she soon had enough of sleep) and walk noiselessly to the window, with bare feet, to drink in the marvellous starry sky She would remain there for hours in dreamy ecstasy till dawn and cold sent her shivering back to bed

One night her Marc joined her It was the eve of their departure They were going on to Rome next day Five days in the Eternal City Then home Marc drew near, unperceived She started and precipitately began to excuse herself She said

"Don't scold me! It is a sin to sleep on such nights when one has such a little time left to live"

He did not protest, as one does in such cases, out of politeness He did not say "You have not got such a little, you have got lots" He said

"That's true"

(She remembered it the following night)

But he had gone to fetch a coat, and tenderly put it round his mother's shoulders Then she felt the coolness of the night, and she shivered He took her hand and they stayed there

## THE COMBAT

contemplating the night and their thoughts From the window on the top story they could see the roofs of Florence, and emerging the Campanile and the squat Duomo, buttressed on its drums, like a monstrous insect about to jump The murmur of fountains rose from below, and like cocks, the clocks every quarter passing on the watchword to each other, indefatigably recalling the flight of time Infrequent footsteps sounded on the flagstones And from the next room (Annette and Marc smiled) came Assia's decided little snore Annette asked her son

"My big brother, are you happy now?"

He said

"Big sister, thank you!"

"Thank me, what for?"

"For having given me life"

Her heart was inundated with joy

"Then, all said and done, you do not regret the adventure?"

"The adventure of being a man?" he asked "No All said and done, miseries and shames, and cruelties, and death at the end, it was worth while living!" *Dimicandum*

It's fine, it's good "

"With peace at heart"

"Peace in warfare And good companions in arms like these two"

He pointed to the one who slept and put his arm round the other Annette said

"The two others will carry the one who falls to the goal"

(She was thinking of herself)

Marc said

"Promised! The one who conquers, conquers for the three"

Annette said proudly

"For all"

---

## THE COMBAT

---

Marc laughed for joy And he kissed Annette impulsively,  
and she returned his embrace

A patter of bare feet A mocking voice whispering  
"Caught in the act!"

And two paws dug their pincers into the fat part of their  
backs It was the cat, Assia said

"What a disgrace! Mother Annette debauching my husband for me Rake! Just you come back to my bed!"

But they took her between them, wrapped in the same shepherd's coat Assia teased first one, and then the other, and both tickled her But they stood still, watching the fleet footsteps of the dawn, which seemed to run over the roofs Darkness fled into the corners And suddenly the dagger of a cross surmounting a dome flamed with a ray of gold The day had entered by assault

### LVI

It was fairly late when they left the hotel They had meant to make the most of this last day But they had fallen asleep when they went back to bed, and they overslept themselves Marc and Assia, waking in each other's arms, were startled to hear a clock strike eleven But "all said and done", as the Mother said, they did not think it was time wasted

Annette had not waited for them She had left a note on her table giving them a rendezvous inside the Duomo, a little before noon They searched there and found her, at last, in the darkest corner, in the shadow of the high altar, before the tragic *Deposition from the Cross* Among all Michaelangelo's works, this one by an invincible attraction had touched Annette's heart the most, and she had come to say good-bye to it They dragged her off Assia had little taste for Michaelangelo (she had little enough for art), and she stuck out her lip disdainfully to show her aversion for these stone



larvae wrapped in semi-darkness, as in a spider's web And the spider was up there, lurking, with its enormous tentacles, at the bottom of the well of the cupola

"Woof! Let's get out!" said Assia, leading them off with a high hand She never felt at ease under that tense God, watching from the bottom of a hole

"The devil doesn't like holy water," said Marc

"I like free water," said Assia, "water of the earth, in the sunshine Let who will drink the holy water out of foot baths"

"And you like the water of the vine still better"

"It's God's blood," said the she-devil, showing off "Let's go and booze"

They went off gaily to lunch They had chosen a *trattoria* near the Arno On the way Assia teased Annette about her taste for shadow and devotion She said that if she had known it sooner she would never have married her Annette said that shadow was necessary in order better to enjoy light

"And sorrow to savour joy I know the anthem," retorted Assia "*Durch Leiden Freude!* Thank you! I'll stick to joy undashed with water, like pure wine My head is strong enough to stand it I want no tears in my glass My Marc undiluted"

"Your Marc, your Marc! Monopolizer! Share and share alike! He came from my vat!"

"And where do I come in, in all this?" protested Marc "It's ridiculous! Shut up, the pair of you! I am quite willing to be drunk and eaten, but at least let it be by humanity's great maw"

"I am humanity," said the glutton But she added

"We joke, darling, but you are right And that is why we love you I am not a monopolizer I want my Marc to be for all Let those who are hungry eat you! And let's all three be drunk and eaten together!"

At the Ponte Vecchio the two women stopped to buy

souvenirs in the shops    Mosaics and bindings    Assia wanted some coral horns, to turn away the evil eye    Though she laughed at it, it was not at all certain that she did not believe in it, in the depths of her muddled soul    Of religion, not a trace left !    But superstitions as many as you like !    It was a game    And to play well, one must be taught by the game    While she ferreted in the boxes, she did not see that the evil eye was hovering round her    Marc, whose eyes were not occupied with his fingers, like hers, noticed some blackshirts at the entrance to the bridge, some young men on the watch, several of whom were making their rounds and scrutinized him as they passed behind his back    He caught glances between two of them designating him    He said nothing about it to his companions    At any other time, Assia would have been quicker than he to see and perhaps to recognize    for it was not the first time that such figures had crossed their path. But the coral fetishes, like gods of another clan, held her eyes, and led her into the trap

Having made their purchases, the two women and Marc returned to the entrance of the bridge, and they had just passed the group of watchmen with whom Marc had exchanged scrutiny    Assia, who was chattering about her baubles, stopped short and looked back after they had passed    she thought she had seen (illusion !) the old man of Lugano, Buonamico's confidant, passing in a taxi, and her eyes followed the taxi, which stopped a few paces off    she watched    But no one got out, and while she was looking behind, the *jettatura* deceived her again, and ill luck came from in front

They were just entering upon the quay of Lugarno Acciajoli, when round a corner there came an old man with a grey beard, slightly bent, with the nervous emaciated features of an intellectual, and short-sighted eyes behind an eyeglass    He cast anxious, troubled glances round him as he walked    He was preceded by a lad of fourteen or fifteen, whose quick eyes sighted the black birds in ambush an instant before they

pounced. He drew back with a cry towards his father, trying to drag him to the door of a house. But the whole band fell upon them with a shout. In an instant the boy was flung ten paces and rolled on the ground. The old man surrounded, struck in the face, his eyeglass broken on his eyes, kicked in the stomach, doubled up, gave way, staggered, clutched, and howled. One of the assailants raised his bludgeon with a shout. The boy, who had got up, flung himself before his father to ward off the blow, received the bludgeon on his raised arm, which cracked like a piece of stick, fell, was savagely trampled on and dragged by the neck towards the river bank, like a dog being thrown into the water.

All this tumult had flashed by at full speed like a sound film, before Assia had time to turn her attention on Marc. When she thought of it, Marc had sprung forward.

Their group of three was left alone on the pavement. All the passers-by had fled in fear, or watched in hiding, from afar. A superior officer, an old man, and decorated, passing in a car near the killers and the child calling for help, turned his eyes away, and the chauffeur accelerated. Marc cried "Cowards!"

His heart had bounded forward before he did. Before he knew what he was about, he found himself in the midst of the black band, which he pierced like a bullet. He tore the boy, half of whose body was already hanging over the parapet, from their clutches. But not for long. Almost immediately he dropped the rescued prey on the pavement, and sank down, clasping both hands on his left breast. A tall Fascist, towering half a head above him (the very one who had scrutinized him), with fierce jaws had plunged his knife into him up to the hilt, with both hands. The two women saw the blow. Annette staggered, she had received it. Assia leapt like a panther on her boy to defend him, and her ten nails ploughed the odious face of the butcher, clawing at his eyes. The spectators expected to see her killed. But the unexpected happened.

## THE COMBAT

A man who was watching the scene at a distance, and seemed to be directing it, sprang forward in his turn. A few words were enough. In an instant the whole band dispersed. There was empty space round Marc and Assia. They were alone beneath the sun. And that crowd, now gathered at thirty paces off, looking on!

Marc was dead. At the first blow. His hands clasped on his heart. The stream of blood trickled between his fingers. Head thrown back on the pavement, his open eyes, now sightless, held graven, under the curtain of blood, the sky of Tuscany.

Within fifteen paces, Annette stood alone, paralyzed, looking on him with staring eyes, breathless, stretching out her arms. The breath came back like the panting of a broken bellows. The crowd behind her could hear it. But not one came forward to support the mother. She had begun to walk towards her son. But her legs were like stone. Every step cost a superhuman effort.

She reached Assia leaning over the well-beloved, lying in his blood. She put her aside. She sat down in the blood. She took the dead son in her arms, she clasped him, she laid him on her knees. And suddenly full life, and with life, sorrow, flowed back to her like the thawing of a river. With her face raised towards the implacable, towards the empty sky, she cried aloud, like a Corsican "*vociferatrice*". The silent crowd, in their turn, gasped with emotion. But with the majority, the emotion was theatrical. Assia, taken aback, had suspended her sobs, to listen to the *lamento*. The mother called the son.

"Come back, come back! Don't go away, my boy!"

She implored him, she demanded him of the other Mothers, the unfathomable sources of Life, she would have gone to seek him there, like Orpheus. She kissed him, she put her mouth to the hole of blood, the fountain of his breast. And the heart-rending threnody issued from her bloodstained mouth. But not a tear fell from her eyes.

Then the police came upon the scene. In a few minutes the crowd was swept beyond the bridge, traffic was held up at the four street corners, and from the Via Por S. Maria came a taxi at full speed, and stopped beside the two women and the body. The man who had seemed to direct the whole scene got out. Head bared, with a formal solemn air and official condolences, he approached Annette, and at a sign from him two other men bent down to lift the body. Then the *lamento* stopped short. Annette, gazing full at the "enemy", put him aside. She heard her own voice rolling away in the distance, and she recognized the savage baying of Sylvie, howling on the pavement of Paris, where her daughter lay killed<sup>1</sup>. A terrible calm came over her. Not a word more. She got up. Her glance summoned Assia. With her help she raised the son, the lover, the beloved. She took the shoulders, Assia the legs. Without a look at the men offering their help, repulsing them, she carried the body to the taxi. She laid it down. Assia got in. As she was about to get in herself she perceived, at a little distance, behind the wall of police, the old man and the boy who had been attacked, for whom her son had died. They were gazing at her with eyes like beaten dogs, bloodstained and muddy, asking pardon. She bowed to them gravely. Her tragic calm seemed to say "All is well."

The taxi started.

Inside the hotel not a face to be seen on the way or on the stairs, the police had cleared the place. In the room under the roof, where she had watched the daybreak with her son, and where the murderous sun was now beating in, Annette washed the body, bandaged it, and dressed it, she would allow no other hand to come in contact with the sacred flesh. Save Assia. But Assia was no help. Though used to death she succumbed beneath the blow. She could not look upon the body of the beloved without falling upon it with sobs and

<sup>1</sup> Summer

furious kisses Annette shut her in the next room while she finished the funereal toilet And afterwards, when she opened the door, she found her prostrate on the threshold She laid Assia, fully dressed, on the bed Assia, insensible, let her have her way She had alternate fits of torpor and fury

Silence was about the rooms Everything had been arranged to put an hermetically-sealed barrier between the two women and the outside world No visits were permitted Strict watch was kept that no one should have speech with them The two escaped victims of the attack, father and son, tried in vain to come and utter their gratitude The women knew nothing of this The matter was hushed up in the Press The legal medical officer came for form's sake Towards the end of the day the Italian authorities also appeared, they presented their condolences Annette received them with her head high, calm and severe, she had the strength to betray nothing of her feelings Assia had been obliged to hide in the other room in order not to show her fury, she flung herself upon her bed, biting it The French Consulate also put in a tardy appearance They took down the depositions, consulted with Annette about the coffin, the removal of the body, and their departure She would have wished not to remain there a day longer But the formalities detained her till the following evening

She was obliged to spend the night in the murderous city, the city of stone which has lapped the blood of the murdered for so many centuries (And it is from that blood that the flower of art has sprung At that moment Annette could have trampled on that flower! ) Assia wanted to watch with her, kneeling at the feet of the dead, kissing them, she murmured an incoherent lament, now rising, and now breaking off, in the end she sank into mind darkness, unconscious, her cheek resting against Marc's bare foot Annette sat bending forwards, her dry eyes staring into the gulf Darkness everywhere, above, below, darkness out-

side, darkness within    Black wings bore her, soaring to the centre    She herself was Darkness

The light returned    A new era    *Post mortem*  
A strange sun which her eyes had never known    Annette now belonged to another age

But it was not the time to shut her eyes and lie down, like him, beside him, with hands joined in the hollow of the breast. There were duties to be fulfilled. She attended to her toilet, dressed herself again, she saw to it that Assia against her will, took some nourishment. She forced it on her. Assia refused it, ate, wept, ate her tears and her meal. At the end she retched and brought it up again. The double coffin was brought very early, and they sealed up the leaden prison. Assia fled into the passage like a mad woman, stopping her ears with her hands. Annette refused to go away, she watched them walling up her child. She said to him, silently

"Don't be afraid! I am here, my boy"    "

After that the three were left alone. The shutters were closed all the day. They never moved. Son, mother and wife. The three lay stretched out. Annette had Assia, who could not be alone, beside her on her bed, she held her hand, side by side, they lay full length on their backs. Assia, stupefied by grief, grew drowsy with the noise of the street, or was troubled at the sinister buzzing of a large fly in the room. Annette squeezed her hand tighter. With wide eyes, fixed unseeingly on the ceiling, Annette went over all her life with Marc.

The train left after eleven o'clock that night. The two women found the French Consul, who had taken them under his care, on the platform, and he did not leave them till he had seen them off. They had a reserved compartment. Leaning out of the window to say good-bye, Annette again caught sight of the boy with a broken arm, whom Marc's intervention had saved, outside the barrier. He had managed to reach the platform, but they kept him away from the carriage. Annette beckoned to him, and told the Consul that she

---

## THE COMBAT

---

wished to speak to him. The official very reluctantly let him pass, and the lad rushed to the step of the carriage and kissed Annette's hand, with tears. He volubly uttered words which Annette could not understand, but they had no need of words. Annette, freeing her hand, placed it on the boy's head, and said, aloud, so that all present could hear it, that she recommended him to the care of the authorities, and she begged the Consul to let her know, later, what became of him. She wanted, as far as possible, to prevent any vengeance coming into play after her departure.

The engine whistled. The authorities did not wish the scene to be prolonged. Annette sat down, in her mourning veils. And the train disappeared into the night.